

# The Layalina Review

## On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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### Arab Media Forum Tackles ‘Change and Crisis’

Organized by the Dubai Press Club, the Arab Media Forum “will be attended by well over 600 top media persons from all across the Arab world and beyond, making it the largest and most significant media gathering in the Middle East,” reports Gulf News.

With the slogan “Arab Media: Weathering a Period of Change and Crisis,” the Forum will be held on May 11 and 12 at the Atlantis Hotel in Dubai. The Forum will conclude with the Arab Journalism Awards to honor outstanding work in Arabic-language journalism, continues the news site.

As part of the Forum, remarks Gulf News in a separate article, award-winning American investigative journalist Seymour Hersh will deliver a keynote address touching on “the fundamentals of investigative journalism, his own experiences in the Middle East chasing stories, the current political situation in the region following the Obama presidency and recent international developments.”

The Forum will feature a plethora of workshops covering a variety of issues relative to the Arab media landscape. Specifically, “three workshops will focus on the growth of private TV channels in Egypt, and the proliferation of fatwa programs, and the emergence of popular heritage channels in the Arab world,” reports AME Info.

The Egyptian workshop “will look at the immense growth of private channels in Egypt in recent times,” including “bold programs that deal with Egyptian and Arab issues with grit and professionalism,” notes the news site. The workshop entitled “From Terrestrial Fatwa to Satellite Fatwa” will investigate “the phenomenon of instant fatwa, an issue that raises a number

of questions about the credibility and propriety of this whole exercise.” Finally, the third television workshop will analyze the emergence of channels devoted to popular heritage which “either convert heritage-related concepts into mere entertainment and recreation, or rake up sectarian issues, regional disputes and tribal animosities,” according to AME Info.

*“The mushrooming of Arabic versions of foreign television channels raises a number of pertinent questions about their true objectives as well as the way the outside is looking at the Arab world.”*

*Maryam Bin Fahad,  
Executive Director of the  
Dubai Press Club.*

In addition to those on television, several workshops will highlight developments in print media and new media. AME Info reports that the Forum will host a workshop “on the growth and decline of daily newspapers in the Arab world and the West respectively,” entitled “Daily Newspapers: Crisis in the West, Growth in the Arab World.”

Print media in the Arab world have “seen an expansion in more than one country, such as

Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and the number of daily publications have multiplied,” notes the news site. Discussion at this workshop will focus on the challenges facing print media in light of advancements in the communications technology.

In terms of new media, the Forum will “look at the latest developments in new media in the region, which has seen tremendous growth in recent times

### In this issue:

Arab Media Forum Tackles ‘Change and Crisis’	1
Who Watches Al-Hurra?	2
Arabic Media on the Rise	2
New Academy Trains Media Professionals	3
Media Freedom on the Decline	3
Gaza Media Coverage Sparks Further Controversy	4
The First 100 Days of Obama through the Arab Lens	5
Muslims and Western Anxieties	5
Ban on Women’s Gyms in Saudi Arabia	6
Conflicting Opinions on Swine Flu	7
Internet Clampdown Stronger than Ever	7
References	9

thanks to the electronic revolution,” continues AME Info. The news site argues that developments in new media are “sure to have a direct impact on cognitive and moral fabric, particularly of the younger generations.”

In further coverage of the approaching Forum, Gulf Times also discusses the phenomenon of Arabic versions of foreign TV channels – a topic to be covered in Dubai. Over the past few years, “after the arrival of the American Al-Hurra, BBC and the German DTC FILI, Russian and French channels also made their appearance,” notes the news site.

## Who Watches Al-Hurra?

In reference to President Obama’s interview with Al-Arabiya, Nadim Hasbani reiterates for the Huffington Post that above all this was a sign that the new administration lacks confidence in the US government’s own Arabic language news channel, Al-Hurra.

This move is, according to Hasbani, “symbolic of the widespread failure of Western-owned Arabic TV channels to establish themselves as credible news sources with Middle Eastern audiences.” He argues that if Arabs watch the news from mainstream Arab media such as Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera, they do not watch Western-funded news channels.

Arab audiences still regard Western-funded Arabic channels such as BBC, France 24 and Al-Hurra with suspicion. “They suspect them of hiding ‘Western agendas’ behind programming, particularly when it comes to political content,” he notes before adding that it reflects distrust towards Western policies in the Middle East.

Hasbani argues that the most striking example is Al-Hurra, which translates as “the free” in Arabic. Its journalism standards rank far below the level of major American channels, and its editorial stance on the all-important Palestinian conflict leans sharply in favor of Israel.

He adds, “The result is that Al-Hurra’s current viewership represents less than 3% of the potential market and drops below 2% in times of crisis.”

The only channel that distinguishes itself is Al-Jazeera English which obtained international recognition during the Gaza conflict. The Arab-speaking world is in dire need of the kind of coverage Al-Jazeera English provides, he continues.

“To help fill this void, Western governments must do more than pour money into perceived propaganda machines like Al-Hurra,” he maintains.

Arabic channels operated by Western states must maintain high journalism standards, provide balanced coverage and include uncensored news about controversial subjects of high importance to Arab viewers, such as Hamas and Hezbollah. “This is the only way to attract a wider audience in the Arab world,” concludes Hasbani.

However, former Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy James K. Glassman disagrees on his blog and states that in less than five years, Al-Hurra, with a minuscule budget, has established itself as a significant source of news and information in the Middle East, with 26 million viewers tuning in at least once a week.

According to Glassman, it tops Al-Jazeera in Iraq. Referring to the launch of the series Al-Youm, Al-Hurra has improved its content although the press failed to report it.

Glassman states, “My own view is that there is a pressing need for Al-Hurra to exist and to thrive.” There is also a need to complement Al-Hurra by funding TV production that can be placed on other Arabic-language networks.

Al-Hurra’s comparative advantage against Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya lies in the fact that being based in the US allows Al-Hurra to interpret America for Arabic-speaking audiences far better than other networks, continues Glassman. However, Al-Hurra must strike a balance between having a presence in the region and having strong US coverage.

## Arabic Media on the Rise

France 24, the publicly-owned international news channel, is to offer ten hours of Arab broadcasting a day

beginning April 28 compared to the four hours it currently offers, reports Media Network. France 24 is “strengthening its presence in geographically strategic zones where the majority of the population speaks only Arabic,” continues the site. The channel said that the new airing would begin with a special program live from Cairo called “The place of France in the Arab world.”

*“It’s important to restore notions of mission and quality in journalism and get journalists to concentrate on what they do best, which is telling the truth, being independent and being aware of the consequences of what they broadcast and the images they put forward.”*

*Aidan White, Secretary General of the IFJ.*

Since it was launched, France 24 has continued to grow its market share among its target audience in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, with 88%, 80% and 73% respectively saying that they watch the network, according to a survey carried out by the TNS-Sofres institute.

This new format will enable France 24 to pursue its founding principle, and in particular that of its Arabic channel: covering global news from a French perspective, promoting healthy debate and balanced ideas and striving for an open outlook on

international diversity and its pressing challenges, according to Market Watch.

Additionally, following its success in French and English, France 24's audience participation site, The Observers, will now be available in Arabic. The Observers, which was launched in December 2007, is a site that covers international news through the eyes of direct "observers;" namely, people experiencing events on the ground.

BBC Arabic also recently announced a new agreement with MSN Arabia, further expanding the presence of BBC Arabic across the Arab world, reports the BBC Press Office. International news-seekers can now access BBC Arabic content via the MSN Arabia home page. This will complement the direct access audiences have to BBC Arabic on TV, radio, online and on mobile phones.

BBC Arabic breaking news alerts are also offered via mobile operators as a subscription service in Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Yemen and the Palestinian Territories.

In other news, the Arab Media Forum to be held on May 11-12 in Dubai will hold discussions on Arabic versions of foreign television channels and the working environment for the correspondents of foreign news agencies in the Arab world, reports Express.

The session titled "The Arabic Versions of Foreign TV Channels: What Objectives and What Messages?" will analyze one of the most recent phenomena in the media landscape. "The Arab region is drawing increased attention from the Western media on account of its strategic importance and the nature of its issues, ranging from the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian issue to energy issues, 'war on terrorism,' and the Iranian nuclear issue and these have placed the Arab region at the heart of politics and international rivalries," continues the news site.

"The result is the proliferation of representatives from international media organizations who come to cover events and developments in the region," highlights Express. "The concerns of these media organizations have grown wider and include most of the cultural and social situations with a special focus on women, general freedoms and human rights."

## New Academy Trains Media Professionals

Dubai's 24-hour news channel Al-Arabiya has joined Livestation, a destination portal for live TV broadcasting over broadband internet, reports Broadband TV News. Al-Arabiya offers a mix of breaking news, documentaries and sports updates. The channel joins Livestation's existing lineup of Arabic news channels which already include Al-Jazeera, BBC, France 24, Russia Today (Rusya Al Yaum) and Euronews.

"We have found, when we analyze the viewing patterns on the Livestation player, that the broadband audience is both loyal and fickle," comments Matteo Berlucchi, CEO of Livestation. The detailed user statistics are helping Livestation map viewer behavior in ways that have previously not been available to broadcasters.

Al-Arabiya, as all partner channels, will now benefit from this audience information enabling them to target and develop their service in response to actual viewer behavior patterns, Berlucchi added.

In other news, the twofour54 Tadreeb Academy hopes to attract more than 3,000 Arab media students in its first two years of operation, says CEO of twofour54 Tony Orsten, according to Digital Productions.

Highlighting the need for training services through media, he explained, "We have students from right across the MENA region, in places like Saudi Arabia, Oman, Sudan and Kuwait." Tadreeb will help to develop the Arabic content creation talent pool through professional media training.

Twofour54 Tadreeb is the region's premier vocational training academy and the first of its kind in the Middle East and North Africa to offer fully bilingual media industry skills training courses from some of the world's leading media organizations in a world-class training environment, adds Zawya.

The Academy offers more than 200 courses in a variety of media disciplines including television, broadcast technology, journalism, digital media, radio and media business. Animation, web application and design, games development and even media business courses will be added as

new training providers are identified.

"Put simply, twofour54 Tadreeb is a unique proposition. A proposition which is designed to encourage, stimulate and support Arabic content creation by Arabs for Arabs," said Phaedon Vass, head of the Academy.

The Academy boasts world-class training and production facilities, including 2,080 square meters of dedicated training space where participants can access state-of-the-art infrastructure and technology.

## Media Freedom on the Decline

International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) recently launched a campaign to overhaul media laws across the Middle East and North Africa following the decline of press freedom worldwide, reports The Media Line.

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) unveiled a survey exposing worldwide deterioration in media freedom this year. Similarly, Freedom House reported that 2008 marked the first time that decline has been seen in every region of the world, according to the American Free Press.

Independent media in countries in the former Soviet Union, Middle East and North Africa faced intimidation that consequently overshadowed any gains in freedom in those regions.

Israel, the Middle East's lone state boasting "free" media status, was degraded to "partly free" after the Gaza conflict, according to The National, due to restrictions put in place on journalists, namely the country's attempt to limit coverage broadcast by Al-Jazeera, a Qatar-based media outlet.

The International Freedom of Expression eXchange reports that this decline, in addition to the continually low level of press freedom throughout the Middle East, has prompted the IFJ to choose Bahrain as its base for a campaign urging fewer restrictions on the media in the region and denouncing detention of journalists.

The IFJ has opened a regional office intended to organize a series of seminars and conferences, which, according to Trade Arabia, has been welcomed

by the president of the Bahrain Journalists Association, Isa Al-Shaiji.

Trade Arabia also reports that the Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa bin Salman Al-Khalifa has embraced the constructive criticism and has urged the media to support the country's progress in political development.

In a time where governments are reluctant to give journalists freedom, Secretary General of the IFJ Aidan White stated to The Media Line, "It's important to restore notions of mission and quality in journalism and get journalists to concentrate on what they do best, which is telling the truth, being independent and being aware of the consequences of what they broadcast and the images they put forward."

White explained that Bahrain was chosen as the center of the push for free media in order to encourage Gulf countries to be engaged in a debate about democratic reform, and that he hoped Bahrain would move quickly in implementing new media laws, according to Trade Arabia.

"Governments working against freedom of the press are working against their own best interests," states White.

While Bahrain's status in press freedom has not changed in the past year, reports Trade Arabia, White expects that this will give the message to the world that Bahrain wishes to continue openness and encourage independent media.

White further explains that "[the office's] objective is not just to help journalists do their job better but also about changing the nature of the culture of democracy that operates in these countries."

However, The International Freedom of Expression eXchange reports that the IFJ anticipates strong resistance from the governments of the Middle East and North Africa.

Despite these developments in Bahrain, websites continue to be banned, writers are prosecuted and defenders of human rights are prevented from speaking to the media, reports The International Freedom of Expression eXchange.

The Bahrain Center of Human Rights (BCHR) is fighting back against the restrictions put in place

by Bahrain's Minister of Information and Culture Mai Al-Khalifa by urging that awards she received in support of "openness" and "culture" be revoked.

Nevertheless, by encouraging fewer press restrictions in the Middle East, White hopes this campaign will serve as a tool for bringing democracy and freedom to a region where journalists are being held back by restrictions and incarceration.

## Gaza Media Coverage Sparks Further Controversy

Lack of coverage and biased portrayals of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Gaza by Western media are partially to blame for the absence of international intervention in the fighting, claims Ayman Mohyeldin, Gaza Correspondent for Al-Jazeera English, in an interview with Journalism.co.uk. Other alternative media journalists in the region agree with Mohyeldin, adding that unbiased coverage of the Palestinian experience in Gaza is key to gaining international sympathy and action.

*"The Western media has failed tremendously in covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict accurately and contextually."*

*Ayman Mobyeldin, Al-Jazeera English.*

"The Western media has failed tremendously in covering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict accurately and contextually," he said in the online interview. Mohyeldin was one of the few journalists able to continue reporting from Gaza during the Israeli military attack on the region in December 2008,

when Israel also banned all foreign media.

Other sources familiar with the media situation in Gaza agree with Mohyeldin. In an interview with Stefan Christoff of Rabble, Anjali Kamat of Democracy Now! suggests that the timing of the Israeli military offensive, between Christmas and the Western New Year, was purposefully chosen as a period when most foreign journalists would be on hiatus from their work in Gaza.

Kamat also believes that Western mass media has been strikingly biased in its portrayal of what are, in his view, unequal levels of suffering between Palestinian and Israeli residents in Gaza. Kamat said he felt many journalists in Gaza felt compelled "to make some sort of equivalency with Israel...when the situations are simply not comparable."

When asked what the effect would have been if international media had been allowed to cover the war in Gaza, Mohyeldin said it would have been both good and bad; there might be more awareness of the situation, but also more inaccurate and unbalanced information.

In an effort to address the issue of media bias, the Dubai Press Club will hold a session specifically on media coverage of the December 2008 Israeli military actions in Gaza at the eighth Arab Media Forum on May 11-12 in Dubai. According to Emirates Business 24/7, coverage of the Israeli attack "brought to the fore divergent political positions within the media in the region," indicated by the biased commentators that were featured and the language used to describe the conflict.

Another effort to combat unbalanced reporting in Gaza comes from Crossing Borders, a non-partisan NGO that seeks to promote dialogue between young journalists and educators, especially in the Middle East. Dr. Enas Youssef, a journalism professor in Cairo, was quoted by the Yemen Times criticizing mass media for "escalating conflicts," such as the war in Gaza, where he feels many media outlets "decided to throw blame around instead of tackling the real issue of the war on civilians."

Sherine Tadros, also a reporter for Al-Jazeera, speculated to Journalism.co.uk that one reason for waning mass media interest on the situation in Gaza is that without the possibility of sensationalist

photographs, “editors won’t spend [resources] on deploying teams to cover humanitarian tragedies.” Tadros feels that alternative media sources have expanded audiences by covering more sympathetic and compelling human-interest stories in Gaza, which consumers can easily relate to. Nicole Hernandez at Jacksonville.com relates a personal example of how media can shape opinions about Arab people. Hernandez writes that she “had stereotypes about Saudi women without having met or dealt with them before, relying on images and words from articles, TV and books,” which she says mostly “focus on the minority of Arabs and Muslims who do use violence and threats.”

Tadros and Mohyeldin expressed similar views, both commenting on what they see as a heavy bias in Western media against Arabs, especially Palestinians in Gaza.

“One can’t help but feel anger and frustration as to how the world allows for this to happen,” Mohyeldin concludes in the Journalism.co.uk interview. “If people in the West understood what was happening in Gaza, in the West Bank, accurately, they would demand more from their governments.”

## The First 100 Days of Obama through the Arab Lens

100 days into President Obama’s administration, analyses of his foreign policy impact featured prominently in the media. Al-Ahram Weekly’s Gihan Shahine notes that while definitive answers are lacking, there is “an eclectic mix of reactions to the new US president, ranging from public enthusiasm and admiration to frustration and despair.”

According to Morris Reid, a commentator for CNBC interviewed by ArabianBusiness.com, “the Obama effect” will continue to spread abroad.

“People don’t realize how important a president is in setting the tone for a nation, particularly in America,” he adds. Regarding the Bush administration, Reid suggests, “We didn’t respect different opinions, and we frankly didn’t respect and engage with people who may have had a different opinion.”

Juan Cole, President of the Global Americana Institute, writes on his blog Informed Comment that assessments of President Obama’s foreign policy during his first 100 days in office should be based on a comparison to the previous administration’s policies. “Obama has engaged in a number of acts of public diplomacy toward the Muslim world that were intended to change the image of the United States in the region and to marshal for his purposes American soft power.”

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*Juan Cole, President of the Global Americana Institute.*

Shahine highlights that many Egyptian (85%) and Turkish people (76 %) people told a 2007 BBC poll that the US “provoked more conflict than it prevents” in the Middle East, fearing that the US sought to “maintain control over the oil resources” of the region and did not favor democracy.

“Radicalism in the Muslim world is very much wrought up with anti-imperialism... Bush was a poster boy for that arrogance,” adds Cole, who significantly admires Obama’s diplomatic overtures to the Iranian government and his ability to garner the support of 40% percent of Turkey.

Bulent Aras for Media Monitors said

that Obama’s support for Turkey’s inclusion in the European Union to “help to bridge the gap between Islam and West,” as well as his balanced approach to the Armenian genocide issue and promotion of democracy “will soon overturn the bitter legacy of the Bush era.”

In turning attention to Syria, Reid suggests that Obama’s overtures mean “that we can agree to disagree without being disagreeable... There are fundamental things we won’t agree with certain countries on, but that doesn’t mean that they can’t play a helpful and constructive role in the stabilization of this region.” Cole promotes caution in the evaluation of the policies.

“Tone is easy, where there is a will. Substance is hard. Obama, to remain credible, will have to stick to the Iraq withdrawal timetable” and “make breakthroughs” in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, in Afghanistan and against terrorism. “So, an ‘A’ on style, which is all that could probably be accomplished in 100 days. We need to come back and judge substance a year from now,” concludes Cole.

Shahine spoke with Mahmoud Khalil, a professor at Cairo University, who noted that many Middle Eastern citizens do not understand that national policy “does not necessarily change with just the change of one person, [though] Obama’s messages of reconciliation should not be taken lightly” because they indicate that Obama “is getting the world ready for a new policy.”

Ultimately, writes Shahine, the US may have difficulty “changing Arab hearts and minds,” particularly if the “public is dissatisfied with US policies on the ground.”

Reid finally adds that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s “hands on approach” is crucial for the success of Obama’s policies. “I happen to be one of those people who believes that the women of the GCC will have a lot to do with transforming the image of these nations, and a person like Hillary Clinton can go a long way in participating in those empowerment initiatives.”

## Muslims and Western Anxieties

The West and the Muslim world each

experience anxiety regarding the other; however, these fears are illegitimate and unfounded according to Juan Cole, reports The Philadelphia Bulletin.

The mutually negative feelings that have been reported between the American and British publics and Muslims show that the West is highly prejudiced against Muslims, based on fear and mistrust. Muslims report a dismay in Western culture and its lack of commitment to forming more amicable relations.

Cole argues that the West's anxiety is based on a fear that the Middle East is developing full control over oil and gas resources and on a confusion of democratically based political Islam and radical Islam.

Additionally, Cole argues that US involvement in the Muslim world cannot be successful in the long run, arguing, "The Arab street, given the choice between an autocratic but autonomous government not bound to the Christian capitalist West, and a democratic state under the sway of foreign governments, would choose the former."

Dan Froomkin of The Washington Post posits that the resentment towards Muslims has been fodder for the justification of torture techniques condoned by the Bush Administration after the 9/11 attacks in order to create a link between Iraq and Al-Qaeda.

Froomkin suggests that torture was used specifically because it leads to false confessions, citing Army Major Paul Burney who told investigators, "even though they were giving information and some of it was useful, while we were there a large part of the time we were focused on trying to establish a link between Al-Qaeda and Iraq and we were not being successful in establishing a link between Al-Qaeda and Iraq."

Froomkin writes that consensus on the torture cases was reached because nobody involved investigated the gruesome techniques that they were approving, and, as a former CIA official said, it was "a perfect storm of ignorance and enthusiasm."

Such "ignorance and enthusiasm" regarding the Muslim world is being combated by a group of student leaders at Princeton University.

A conference called "Visions and

Revisions: Charting a Common Future for the US and the Arab World," brought together 15 students from the Middle East to explore and discuss issues ranging from politics to culture to human rights.

The conference included presentations, lectures and cultural events with the aim to "cultivate knowledge and empathy and also lay the groundwork for collaborative leadership between student leaders from diverse backgrounds and religions," said senior Zvi Smith.

*There are many, many things that people from the Middle East think about Americans - and a lot of things that Americans think about us - that aren't true."*

*Neama Ebaid, a student at the American University in Cairo.*

A Lebanese student from the American University of Beirut, Youssef Yaacoub, said "It was very touching that the students here have taken the time to really understand our culture and our point of view."

"When I came here I discovered that there are many, many things that people from the Middle East think about Americans - and a lot of things that Americans think about us - that aren't true," said Neama Ebaid, a student at the American University in Cairo.

"Now that we have a better understanding about where people in the US may be coming from, we can communicate this to other students back in the Middle East."

## Ban on Women's Gyms in Saudi Arabia

In March Adnkronos International reported that a group of women in Saudi Arabia founded a movement against the government's decision to close women's gyms that are not connected to the expensive hospital "health centers" that are regulated by the Ministry of Health.

The movement's slogan "Let them get fat," according to Al-Arabiya English, was launched online after the Ministry of Municipalities and Local Affairs announced that all the gyms not open for medical reasons will be closed despite the public outcry.

The popularity of women-only gyms has consistently grown since they first began opening six years ago at the same time that knowledge about the benefits of exercise and fitness for women was increasing. Many women see it as a safe, comfortable place where they are able to move freely and prevent the stress that so many women have from pregnancy and labor.

Opening women's gyms is extremely difficult in the gender-segregated Saudi Arabia, BBC News recently reported. Bader Al-Shibani, owner of a men's club in Jeddah, tried to open one for women, yet says that he "ran into a stone wall at every turn." Many of the clubs started under the façade of beauty salons, which happened to include exercise classes and fitness areas.

This news of the banning of women's gyms ironically came around the same time that officials in the government discussed the possibility of women voting in municipal elections, notes The Guardian. The gyms have already been closed in Jeddah and Dammam, as clerics call women's gyms "shameless" and suggest that women will "be tempted to leave their homes and neglect their husbands and children," adds the news site.

Women's participation in sports has long been a controversial issue in the conservative kingdom where clerics have great influence. Physical education in girls' public schools is banned. Sheikh Abdullah Al-Maneaa, a member of the Supreme Council of Religious Scholars, said that sports such as football and basketball

require lots of movement and jumping, which may “harm girls who are still virgins.”

Reuters quotes Fouziah Alouni, a women’s rights activist, saying, “The idea of female fitness is non-existent within our government,” despite the Ministry of Health reporting high rates of diabetes and bone frailty. There is no government body to oversee women’s health and fitness to take on licensing for women’s gyms, so until that time gyms will continue to close.

## Conflicting Opinions on Swine Flu

Some say the recent swine flu pandemic has encouraged cross-cultural unity in the Middle East, while others see the threat as fuel for existing ethnic divisions, according to conflicting analyses by the Jerusalem Post and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL).

The Jerusalem Post points to a meeting in Israel that drew representatives from the Palestinian Health Ministry and nearby Arab countries, including Jordan and Egypt, as an indication of unity between Israel and its neighbors. The newspaper also reports that Israel’s Tel Hashomer Hospital is being made available to Palestinians, Egyptians and Jordanians who are suspected of contracting swine flu.

Contrarily, in a recent press release the ADL has criticized Arab daily newspapers for publishing “editorial cartoons that demonize the Jewish state and its leaders.” The ADL says that some cartoons feature, “Israeli leaders with faces of pigs.”

The release also quotes the ADL National Director Abraham H. Foxman as accusing the Arab media of using the cartoons to, “[exploit] the swine flu epidemic in an effort to rile up anti-Israel and anti-Jewish sentiment in the Arab street.” The ADL also indicates that the cartoons have appeared in Arab newspapers in Qatar, the UAE and the UK.

Another source of tension over swine flu in the Middle East has emerged from Egypt’s decision to slaughter nearly all of the country’s swine population in an attempt to reduce the risk of flu, says the Christian Science Monitor. The

government’s actions have prompted protest and accusations of discrimination from the country’s Christian minority, which owns and raises nearly all of the pigs in Egypt and partially depends on them for their livelihood.

Other sources highlight the misperceptions surrounding swine flu among many Arabs who have been engaging in “a heated debate in the streets, the cafes and the internet,” according to Al-Bawaba. Some Muslims “are certain they are safe and immune” from swine flu because most Muslims avoid consuming pork due to Islamic dietary restrictions, continues the site.

Al-Bawaba also reports that this misconception has been a common theme on Muslim-centered online forums recently, although swine flu is not known to be transmitted to humans from cooked pork.

## Internet Clampdown Stronger than Ever

Al-Jazeera reports on the various ways in which authorities are stepping up censorship of online media. The article cites a study by the Committee to Protect Journalists, which reveals that “45 per cent of all imprisoned media workers worldwide are bloggers, web-based reporters, or online editors.”

According to the CPJ’s “Ten Worst Countries to be a Blogger,” Menassat highlights that the Middle East region is the most notorious against freedom of online speech. While Burma was the worst offender, countries from the Middle East and North Africa dominated the top ten: second place went to Iran, third to Syria, fifth to Saudi Arabia, seventh to Tunisia, and tenth place to Egypt.

Egyptian journalist and blogger Nora Younis says to Al-Jazeera that, while previously online writing had been ignored by censors only a few years ago, “bloggers are nowadays taken seriously by authorities as well as Arab media.”

American University in Cairo’s Naila Hamdy, a journalism professor, says that Arab governments have been slow to

catch on.

“So far, unregulated satellite has brought fuelling of sectarian wars, political dissent and opposing views,” Hamdy says. He adds, “With the possibility of thousands more stations and other technologies catching on in a second.”

As Al-Jazeera points out, however, catching up involves broad, heavy-handed government measures. Several countries have imposed travel bans on bloggers, and many have been notoriously imprisoned.

In related news, back in 2000, the BBC reported that Saudi Arabia famously shut down a female-only Meccan internet cafe, on charges that it was used for “immoral purposes.”

Such allegations were vague then as now. “What was uncovered was against both our religion and our traditions,” civil police Brigadier Yousuf Matter said of the Mecca incident.

These days, government accusations are similarly general. Egyptian blogger Abdel Karim Suleiman, known under his blog name, “Kareem Amir,” is serving a four-year sentence at Borg Al-Arab for “insulting Islam and President Hosni Mubarak.”

Syrian blogger Tariq Baissi received three years imprisonment for “weakening the national feeling and the national ethos” for a six-word long comment criticizing Syrian security services to Al-Jazeera. Other bloggers from Tunisia, Nazira Rijba and Slim Boukhdhir have been harassed and threatened for their online writing, reports the CPJ.

Boukhdhir describes working amid the constant fear and reality of censorship. “Every time I changed its address throughout 2006 and 2007, the Tunisian censor would track it down and block it,” he explains.

Reuters reports that, while Syria has attempted to improve its ties with the West, through means including increased tolerance of free speech, a new report from the Syrian Media Center points out that reality has shown no actual reduction in harshness of Syrian censorship. This includes popular sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Amazon.

The report, “Syrian pens fall silent,”

showed that the government blocked 225 internet sites in 2008 – an increase from the 159 blocked in 2007.

Yet Magharebia, notes a new development in the censorship war. There is a new group in Morocco designed to protect the rights of bloggers. The group is designed both to educate the public as to what practices are within their legal right.

Anticipating government pushback, the group also aims to educate the blogger community on best practices, in order to prevent drastic censorship measures, explains Said Benjebli, who was elected president of the new organization.

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