

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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Pakistanis Rail on McHale

Pakistani journalist Ansar Abbasi harshly criticized US Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale during an interview for the current state of American foreign policy, reports the New York Times. After McHale gave a diplomatic presentation on building bridges between America and the Muslim world, Abbasi thanked her politely for meeting with him before telling her that he hates all Americans.

“You should know that we hate all Americans, Ms. McHale,” Abbasi told her. “From the bottom of our souls, we hate you.” According to a recent poll, Mr. Abbasi’s statement mirrors 25% of the population in Pakistan.

For all of the administration’s efforts to call attention to the non-military ties that would bind the two countries, “America is still being judged by many Pakistanis as an uncaring behemoth whose sole concern is finding Osama bin Laden, regardless of civilian Pakistani lives,” claims the New York Times.

During the same official visit, Special Representative for Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke received a similar lashing from Pakistani opposition leader Liaqat Baloch. Holbrooke apparently defended his position with Baloch, and McHale says she followed suit with Abbasi. McHale asserts that the positions she defended would appear logical to most Americans, but often fail to impress Pakistanis.

McHale added that although she is aware her arguments did not sway Abbasi, she was pleased to hear his thoughts as she is attempting to understand the source of anti-American sentiments in Pakistan.

In addition to continuing the battle against militants along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border, the Obama administration’s strategy for the region stresses broadening America’s economic ties to the country, especially investing in non-military areas like infrastructure development, trade, energy, schools and jobs.

A record 2,118 civilians were killed as a result of US military involvement in Afghanistan in 2008 alone, according to a United Nations statistic highlighted in the World Bulletin.

Gary Schmitt explains on the Enterprise Blog that McHale’s approach to public diplomacy is to blame for her argument with Abbasi, because she quickly ceded “the higher moral ground.” Obama desires to cast his approach to the Islamic world as more realistic than the previous administration, but Schmitt argues that anti-American views like Abbasi’s are valuable within Pakistani communities, and will be extremely slow to change.

Obama should instead attempt to force anti-American Pakistanis to admit that their hostility “undermine[s] every possibility of improving [their] country’s situation,” says Schmitt.

Schmitt also claims that if such an approach were adopted, “We wouldn’t have the spectacle of an undersecretary of State looking so weak in a part of the

world where weakness is an invitation for more abuse and more trouble.”

The increasing number of ‘special envoys’ sends a message to Pakistani leaders that combating the Taliban and Al-Qaeda should be their “most urgent

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priority,” writes Dean Nelson on his blog for the Daily Telegraph. “What Pakistanis actually hear [from the US] is this: ‘Our need for security is more important than your desire for justice. We are more important than you.’”

Obama Wishes Muslims a “Ramadan Kareem”

In a video posted on the White House website, President Obama wished Muslims around the world “Ramadan Kareem” (roughly translated as “happy Ramadan”) at the start of the Muslim holy month, says the Wall Street Journal. The President’s Ramadan greeting is his latest attempt to reach out to the Muslim world, which originally began with a video greeting to Iranians on Nowruz, the Iranian New Year, and continued with his June speech in Cairo.

Obama stated that he hoped to reiterate his “commitment to a new beginning between America and Muslims around the world,” the Wall Street Journal continues. He said that his administration is working to bring peace to the Middle East and Central Asia by ending the war in Iraq, “isolating violent extremists” in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and backing a two-state solution to the Arab-Israeli dispute.

“All of these efforts are a part of America’s commitment to engage Muslims and Muslim-majority nations on the basis of mutual interest and mutual respect,” Obama affirms. The message is translated into thirteen languages on the White House’s website.

Obama’s “unyielding support for a two-state solution that recognizes the rights of Israelis and Palestinians to live in peace and security” was made during a standoff largely centered on the White House’s demand for

a settlement freeze by Israel, as noted by the Wall Street Journal.

“You should know that we hate all Americans, Ms. McHale.”

Ansar Abbasi, Pakistani Journalist.

Sultan Knish of Right Side News accused Obama of being “unyielding” against Israel and pro-Israel Jews and blamed him for “greeting Ramadan with a promise to support Palestinian Arab terrorism and oppress Israel.”

While more than a billion Muslims devote themselves to prayer, fasting, and charity during Ramadan, a small minority “escalate violence in the name of jihad,” says the National Post. In the weeks before Ramadan, hundreds of Muslims have been murdered in Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Yemen and Somalia.

Car bombs in Iraq killed 96 and injured 536; suicide bombings at police posts in Chechnya killed 25 and injured 160. In Somalia, a Ramadan offensive launched by Islamist rebels against African Union peacekeepers resulted in the deaths of 22 people.

The National Post also quotes Muslim Khan, a spokesman for the Taliban in Pakistan’s Swat Valley, who claims his group is preparing a military offensive to take place during Ramadan. “The Taliban will intensify attacks,” he said. “It won’t be long until they gain control of entire Swat Valley. We have a large number of suicide bombers and now is the time to use them.”

In preparation for the seasonal increase in violence during the Muslim holy month, governments have stepped up combat efforts. Police

in Kuwait arrested six suspected terrorists, who they say planned to attack Camp Arifjan, home to 15,000 US troops. In Bangladesh, a public awareness campaign is set to launch during Ramadan to counter calls for violent jihad.

Islamist websites are currently filled with rumors of a new Ramadan message from Osama bin Laden. In the past, Al-Qaeda has called for Ramadan terror campaigns “to come closer to Allah through the blood of infidels.” Yet many Muslims reject such extremists and condemn the holy month as a justification for violence.

“Ramadan is about returning to the fountain of truth and drinking from it as deeply as possible,” Muqtedar Khan, director of Islamic studies at the University of Delaware, writes to the National Post.

“All of these efforts are a part of America’s commitment to engage Muslims ... on the basis of mutual interest and mutual respect.” .”

Barack Obama, US President.

Obama’s Ramadan greeting follows the release of Abdelbaset Al-Megrahi, the convicted Lockerbie bomber, from imprisonment in Scotland. Dean Nelson, for the Telegraph, supports the “magnanimous” decision to release the dying man on compassionate grounds. Nelson calls the statements by Obama’s FBI director, who said Scotland had given comfort to terrorists’ insulted victims, “vindictive.”

“By showing compassion for a man who did not deserve it, Scotland has deployed a weapon America does not appear to have in its arsenal, and fired it into the heart of the Muslim world in its holiest month... Now, as Muslims throughout [sic] the world look into their hearts, tiny Scotland has invited America too to find its own,” Nelson wrote.

According to President Obama’s under-secretary of state for public diplomacy, Judith McHale, the writer had actually declared that Muslims hate America because they perceived the war on terror as a war on Muslims. It killed thousands of innocent Iraqis for weapons of mass destruction which did not exist, and that the United States preached democracy and transparent government, but supports corrupt dictators and rulers overseas.

Gamal Mubarak Wants to be Your Facebook Friend

Gamal Mubarak, son of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, held an online interview with 12,000 of Egypt’s Internet users, says the Los Angeles Times. Mubarak’s dialogue is the first time in the Middle East that a politician and future presidential candidate has used the Internet to connect with the public, according to China View.

Mubarak invited users to send questions and concerns via Facebook or his Sharek (“Participate”) website (www.sharek.eg). Questions and concerns focused on the country’s high rate of inflation, difficult living conditions, corruption, and the policies of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). The most popular topic was the question of who will succeed the current president.

The junior Mubarak, who answered live on Sharek, didn’t respond to

inquiries regarding his candidacy for head of state after his 81-year old father leaves office. The deadline given to place questions before the actual discussion has given rise to doubts that some “critical” questions might have been filtered, says Middle East Online.

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*Saad Hagra, Editor-in-Chief
of Al-Alam Al-Youm*

Response to Mubarak’s online dialogue has been varied, continues China View. A young Egyptian said, “It is a good idea to approach the youth, get to know their viewpoints and exchange opinions with them so that if he becomes president one day he would know what the youth and the new generation are thinking.”

Saad Hagra, editor in chief of Al-Alam Al-Youm (“The World Today”) Newspaper stated, “The idea that he engages with the youth and with people in general is good. Holding dialogue with citizens, listening public opinion and feeling the pulse of Egyptian street is a good thing, provided that it has not been arranged beforehand.”

The Internet dialogue appears to be part of the NDP’s strategy to use new media to reach out to Egypt’s people

before the coming 2011 presidential election, says Middle East Online. Mubarak seems to be treading the same road as President Obama, who used Facebook and other social media in his 2008 campaign.

The Internet, however, has been a hostile environment for the NDP. Anti-government bloggers and Facebook activists have dominated the Egyptian blogosphere since it began to flourish in 2005. The opposition Facebook group “6th of April Youth Movement” boasts 74,000 members and there are more than 160,000 blogs, most of which are hostile to the government, according to a 2008 official report.

Mubarak’s use of the Internet is ironic, says the LA Times, given that his father has arrested many opposition bloggers and Facebook activists. Writing in opposition for the Al-Wafd daily, Mohammed Amin noted that the majority of Egyptians “do not use the Internet or know about Facebook,” says Middle East Online. Amin makes a valid argument given that Internet penetration in Egypt is around 12%, much of which is for entertainment.

Yale Press Scorned for Scrapping Mohammad Cartoons

Yale University Press has come under fire recently for deciding to omit controversial cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad from a scholarly book, reports Times Online. The book analyzes the global reaction to the cartoons, which were originally printed in a Danish newspaper and prompted intense debate and protests around the world.

The 12 cartoons included images of Mohammad, which is prohibited

in Islam, and were considered especially offensive for portraying the Prophet as a terrorist.

Yale has defended its decision, saying in a press release that, “The original publication in 2005 of the cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammad led to a series of violent incidents, and repeated violent acts have followed republication ... More than two hundred lives have been lost, and hundreds more have been injured.”

“My book is an academic book with footnotes and the notion that it would set off civil war in Nigeria is laughable.”

Jytte Klausen, Author of “The Cartoons that Shook the World”

The press release continues by noting that the University “consulted both domestic and international experts... [including] counterterrorism officials,” ambassadors, Muslim officials, and scholars of Islam.

The author of the book, Jytte Klausen, submitted it for publication including the cartoons (and other images of Mohammad), but the University opted to edit them out, according to the press release.

“My book is an academic book with footnotes and the notion that it would set off civil war in Nigeria is laughable,” Klausen told Times Online. In the book, Klausen claims that the protests in the wake of the original cartoons “were orchestrated by extremists” hoping to

undermine organized governments.

Klausen insists Yale is blowing the projected reaction to the book out of proportion, and that, “the book’s message is that we need to calm down and look at this carefully.”

Klausen also told the Yale Daily News “that the experts were never actually shown in the context of the book and were instead just shown the cartoons on their own.” She adds that she has “a reputation as a fair and sympathetic observer,” and that “the purpose was to print the entire page from the newspaper” where the cartoons originally printed.

Yale Daily News goes on to refer to an opinion piece in the New York Post calling Yale “cowardly” and “shameful,” and a statement by the American Association of University Professors saying they “deplore [Yale’s] decision and its potential consequences.”

Scholar Martin Kramer shares this view, writing on his blog that he is skeptical reprinting the cartoons would instigate violence elsewhere. Kramer also points out that part of the reason the American people are willing to undergo fairly extreme measures aimed at preventing attacks (such as restricted visas and airport searches) is so that “a university press can publish the Danish cartoons in a book about the Danish cartoons, and do so without fear.”

“Given a choice between undergoing a baggage search and muzzling themselves, Americans prefer the former,” Kramer continues.

The book, titled *The Cartoons that Shook the World*, is slated to be published in November, according to the Yale Daily News.

Google Engine Launches in Palestinian Territories

The Los Angeles Times reports that on August 13, Google launched Google.ps, a new domain in the Palestinian territories which enables an estimated 2.4 million residents to redefine their searches. The new domain is in addition to other local domains that Google has launched, including google.co.uk (Google United Kingdom) and google.jo (Google Jordan).

According to Google’s Arabiya blog, the new domain will allow Palestinian users to “access Google in Arabic... and to [access] more locally relevant content.” Before Google.ps, Palestinian users have had to rely on foreign domains; Google.jo and Egypt’s Google.eg in the West Bank and Gaza, respectively.

Google.ps will also allow for more localized searches which will enable more effective targeted advertising via Google’s AdWords software. AdWords places ads using search terms and location based on IP address. Nasir M., who runs an online business from the Palestinian territory, believes that Google.ps will allow Palestinians to “use more local services and rely more on local business, especially with the region-specific ads.”

Global Voices notes that Palestinians in East Jerusalem will not have automatic access to Google.ps, although anyone can access the engine by typing in the URL directly.

Google.ps brings Google’s total number of worldwide domains to 160, says the LA Times. The company, which plans to unroll more domains in the coming months, has launched 6 new domains this year in the Middle East and Africa

bringing the total to 30 in Africa and 12 in the Arabic-speaking world.

Tribeca Comes to Qatar

The Doha Tribeca Film Festival (DTFF), Qatar's first film event, is set to be staged from October 29 to November 1. The festival's declared mission is to create a hub for regional filmmakers in the Arab state through education initiatives and community involvement, reports Reuters. The New York Tribeca Film festival was originally founded by actor Robert DeNiro after 9/11 to enable the international film community and the general public to experience the power of cinema by redefining the film festival experience.

"While there is a large pool of local talent in Qatar and the region, who are interested in making films, it needs to be tapped into and educated."

Amanda Palmer, Executive Director of Doha Tribeca Film Festival

The Doha festival will host about 30 films, a third of them Middle Eastern Arab films. Amanda Palmer, executive director of the festival, told Reuters in a telephone interview, "While there is a large pool of local talent in Qatar and the region, who are interested in making films, it needs to be tapped into and educated."

The festival seeks to specifically emphasize the training, engagement and education of local emerging and aspiring screen-writers and filmmakers. The United Arab Emirates have become a place for budding filmmakers in the region to showcase their work, and although Qatar is primarily known as a business center and is the world's largest exporter of liquefied natural gas, it is now aiming to mold itself into a cultural capital for the region. Qatar also hosts the Al-Jazeera Documentary Film Festival.

Palmer comments that Doha's Tribeca festival will differ from its regional counterparts due to its "community-minded" agenda, and expects greater engagement from the local population.

According to the Examiner, the Festival will offer an unprecedented opportunity to celebrate cinema, culture, education and community in Qatar.

While most of the DTFF action will take place at the Museum of Islamic Art, the cinema buzz will extend to Souk Waqif, hotspot hotels such as the W and Four Seasons, and other choice venues around Doha.

The festival has launched a new website providing information about the upcoming event, notes Digital Productions Middle East. The website, DohaTribecaFilm.com, includes ticketing information, screening times, event schedules, and other multimedia clips detailing the culture and heritage of Qatar.

"The traction we've already gotten through Facebook, Ikbis and our other social networking tools shows a real hunger out there for our content," remarked Ahmed Shihab-Eldin, web content producer. The team said putting up the website was a must as people interested about the upcoming festival have been clamoring for more information.

Other special features on DohaTribecaFilm.com include

a Flickr photo gallery of film enthusiasts' photos documenting the build-up to the Festival, a Doha/NY blog linking DTFF to the New York Tribeca community, and hours of film-centric programming from the Doha-based "Fabulous Picture Show."

One-on-one interviews, dynamic video content, and opportunities for the community to get involved in competitions, workshops and other special events are other highlights of the official website.

"Hijab Martyr" Stamps Banned in Egypt

Egypt has banned an Iranian postal stamp featuring a picture of Marwa Al-Sherbini, the Egyptian woman brutally murdered in a Dresden, Germany courtroom last July, reports Press TV.

Egyptian authorities responded coldly to the goodwill gesture from Iran, ordering the postal service to ban the entry of mail bearing the Al-Sherbini stamp, says Press TV. Iran says the stamp was a gesture meant to honor the martyrdom of Al-Sherbini, who was a victim of racism.

Al-Sherbini, who became known as the "Hijab Martyr," was suing her neighbor, a Russian immigrant, for insulting her and calling her a terrorist because she wore a headscarf. During the trial, the defendant managed to approach the witness stand and stab her 18 times in front of her three-year-old son. Al-Sherbini was also four months pregnant at the time.

After Al-Sherbini's murder, the Iranian foreign ministry protested strongly to the German ambassador in Iran, says Al-Arabiya. Iran condemned Germany's delayed response and the nation's failure to protect minorities.

Iranian President Mahmoud

Ahmadinejad blamed Al-Sherbini's murder on the German government and the judge and jury in the Dresden court. He criticized discrepancies between the treatment of citizens and non-citizens in Western societies, continues Al-Arabiya

"When a minor incident takes place in countries that are not on good terms with them, they issue a series of condemnations, but they do not respect the rights of their minorities," Ahmadinejad stated at the time.

Soap Opera Sparks Arab Tourism in Turkey

Arab tourists are flocking to Istanbul to see the filming venues of their favorite soap opera, says AFP. The Noor series that aired on the Saudi MBC satellite channel has brought an increase in Arab tourists to Turkey amidst a decrease in overall tourism due to global financial woes.

Noor features a blonde, blue-eyed lead actor and characters, all Turkish but given Arab names to fit with the show's audience. The show is also dubbed in local Arabic dialect depending on the country where it is broadcast.

"All in Jordan watch Noor and Mohannad, just everybody," exclaims Bacher Al-Madjali, a Jordanian tourist in his 50's, referring to the main characters of the series.

Statistics demonstrate an impressive trend: while the overall number of foreign tourists fell by one percent in the first half of 2009, the number of Arab tourists rose, ranging from a 21-percent increase in visitors from the United Arab Emirates to a 51 percent increase in Moroccan tourists.

Cem Polatoglu, owner of Baracuda travel agency, which specializes in the Arab market, has doubled his

clientele. "Previously, Arab tourists were interested in mosques and thermal baths," he told AFP. "No one is interested in thermal cure any more... They all want to visit the mansions where the series are shot and dine in restaurants they've seen on TV."

Ayman Maslamani, the Arab manager of the Istanbul-based Heysem travel agency, believes the current influx of tourists is due more to the charming Istanbul scenery depicted in the soap operas than their melodramatic plots.

"When a minor incident takes place in countries that are not on good terms with them, they issue a series of condemnations, but they do not respect the rights of their minorities."

*Mahmoud Ahmedinejad,
President of Iran.*

"Previously, Arabs did not know much about Turkey. They imagined a backward, filthy country, less developed than richer Arab states," he explains.

According to Balkan Travellers, Noor has made Turkey a popular wedding destination as well. People from Lebanon, Jordan and Iran want to say their vows in the mansions featured in the series.

According to Polatoglu, about a dozen travel agencies are now offering sightseeing tours that specifically include filming locations.

Arabs comprise only a small part of the all foreign tourists in Turkey, but the industry is hopeful the percentage will continue to expand.

Rania Touts Simplicity on Twitter

Queen Rania of Jordan has recently made news through her Twitter account, where she has recently written casually about her "cool" husband, says Al-Arabiya. The queen also posted photos of herself and her family on vacation in Italy, and her husband King Abudllah II on a Harley Davidson.

The queen has hundreds of thousands of "followers" on Twitter, apparently attracted by her "simplicity" and accessibility, writes Al-Arabiya. She calls herself "a mum and a wife with a really cool day job" in her Twitter biography.

Al-Arabiya notes that Queen Rania is also one of the "very few" female Arab leaders that are in touch with social media or using the internet to reach out, especially to young people.

The queen posted a picture of herself, her husband and their teenage son saying, "Make the most of these moments now before ur kids decide ur too uncool to be seen with in public."

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