

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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Eight Years after 9/11: The “Us vs. Them” Approach

Eight years after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Americans still wonder about Muslims and Arabs, “Why do they hate us?” This event has “fundamentally changed how the world perceives Arabs and how Arabs perceive the world,” remarks Jillian C. York, journalist for Global Voices.

Although some Muslim countries have displayed an improvement in their opinion of the US, mainly due to the popular embrace of president Obama’s latest speeches, notes editor in chief of Arab Insight Mohammed Elmenshawy for Global Arab Network, Muslims remain wary of US policies regarding the Arab world.

Likewise, Americans still adopt the “us vs. them” mentality, and negative perceptions prevail. Writer Alia Malek remarks, “Muslim’ and ‘Arab’ seem to be interchangeable terms in the minds of Americans while most Arabs in the United States are Christian, and the majority of Muslims are African Americans.”

According to a recent survey of religious attitudes conducted August 11-17 by the Pew Research Center among 2,010 adults, a majority of them being Christians, nearly 6 in 10 Americans or 58 percent feel that Muslims face discrimination. This is the highest reported rate followed by discrimination against Jews, Evangelical Christians, atheists, and Mormons.

The results concur with findings of a 2007 survey indicating that 1 in 4 Muslims has experienced discrimination, reports The Christian Science Monitor.

While two-third of participants reported that Islam is different from their own

beliefs, the survey also showed that 38 percent of Americans believe that Islam, more than other religions, encourages violence.

This number has dropped from 45 percent in 2007, yet is still higher than it was in 2002 when only 25 percent of American held this view, according to the Pew Research Center.

However, as Americans learn more about Islam, they are more likely to view Muslims in a favorable manner, and are less likely to associate Islam with violence, reports the Detroit Free Press.

“Americans are a little bit more familiar and knowledgeable about Islam compared with 2001 and 2002” said Greg Smith, Pew Forum senior researcher, to NPR news. Findings from the survey show that more positive views and lower prejudice are associated with higher levels of familiarity with Muslims and Islam, explains Ibrahim Hooper, national communications director for the Council on American-Islamic Relations.

Despite this slight increase in knowledge and awareness, about a fourth of Americans remain unfamiliar with the religion. Muslims are still seen as “the others”. This, according to Hooper, explains “why we consistently see hostility towards the faith and its followers.”

Following the spotlight that Muslims receive on the yearly anniversary of the attacks, perhaps it is a good time to emphasize how Muslim Americans “fit into the national landscape” and resemble other Americans socially and economically, reports Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

“We are like you. Islam is peaceful. Complex sociopolitical factors create lunatics who kill people. Please don’t judge a billion people by a few bad apples,” says Moina Noor to The New York Times. In his speech to students in Egypt, President Obama pointed out that

“since our founding, American Muslims have enriched the United States. “

Noor also highlighted that Muslims have fought in American wars, served in the US government, stood for civil rights, started businesses, taught at our universities, excelled in sports arenas, won Nobel Prizes, built some of the US tallest building and lit the Olympic Torch. Given this historical record, she calls for a better understanding and increased open-mindedness toward Islam.

Perhaps this new tolerance of Islam in the United States is best reflected at George

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“We are like you. Islam is peaceful. Complex sociopolitical factors create lunatics who kill people. Please don’t judge a billion people by a few bad apples.”

Moina Noor, Egyptian Student.

Mason University in Virginia. Al-Arabiya reported that the University has allocated a prayer space for Muslim students to perform their religious rituals. Most students interviewed believed that Americans are “starting to change their negative perception of Islam”, which they adopted following the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks.

Public Diplomacy Becoming a One Man Show

Since President Obama delivered his speech in Cairo on June 4th, numerous commentators and analysts have dissected the real effect and intent of his message on Arab and Muslim populations, remarks Col. Norvell B. DeAtkine for American Diplomacy. As the Iraqi sociologist Ali Al-Wardi wrote, “Arabs love words over deeds, and the president’s use of symbols and analogies (a style used in the Qur’an) was enthusiastically received by the people in attendance.”

Above all, the appeal sprung from the fact that the message was intended for the people and not the elite. However, DeAtkine points out that in terms of advancing American interests, little has been achieved by President Obama’s speech since America’s image in the Arab world has barely ameliorated.

Egyptian journalist and politician Mohamed Hussein Haykal believed that the speech was only a “public diplomacy gambit” given the numerous expert speech writers involved. Haykal adds, “If it were a speech meant to change US policy the only input would be that of the president with others only supplying the necessary words.”

DeAtkine notes that one of the more prescient analyses of the Obama speech from a more reasoned Arab viewpoint was written by Azmi Bishara in the recent edition of the Al-Ahram Weekly. Bishara stated “The US president did not have to mount a public relations campaign... The problem is a lack of agreed Arab interests and the lack of a strategy for attaining them. Without these things, the Arabs have little hope of reaping the benefits of changes in the US.”

Morgan Roach, a research assistant at the Heritage Foundation, observes that the administration has also been moving at a glacial pace to formulate a strategy for American public diplomacy. “For example, the late nomination and subsequent Senate confirmation of Judith McHale, Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs raises many questions over Obama’s dedication to public diplomacy,” comments Roach.

Roach adds that very little has been done as well beyond the “eloquent speeches” to establish a strategic policy and map out a clear foreign policy. He warns that until the US takes a more active stance, it will “continue to find itself disadvantaged by a credibility gap in the international community.”

However, Muqtedar Khan, the Director of Islamic Studies at the University of Delaware, argues for Alt Muslims that President Obama will eventually deliver and that he significantly contributed to a decline of anti-Americanism. While intellectuals and politicians do recognize that Obama has ignited hope that US-Muslim relations will change, skepticism persists.

Noting that today the US administration is willing to assert its position in “the face of a public disagreement with the Israeli government,” when it comes to the settlements, Khan emphasizes that the change is palpable, especially in the new

US “posture,” which displays a willingness to engage in diplomatic processes.

“Arabs love words over deeds, and the president’s use of symbols and analogies (a style used in the Qur’an) was enthusiastically received by the people in attendance.”

Ali Al-Wardi, Iraqi Sociologist.

“These skeptics must realize that both language and posture in foreign policy cannot be altered without significant adjustments,” says Khan. He asserts that Obama has a different vision of America’s presence on the world stage and that actions will soon/eventually follow. President Obama’s cautiousness is only denoting that he may not want to lose what was gained by his eloquence and positive overtures towards the Muslim World.

Quarrels Continue Between DoS and DoD

Matt Armstrong remarks on his blog Mountain Runner that one of the main crises facing public diplomacy today is a clear lack of leadership that leads to a poor use of resources. “This is a core issue behind the Congressional examination into Defense strategic communication activities,” he notes.

Armstrong observes that eventually the

inaction and lack of direction of the Department of State in matters of public diplomacy will leave a void for a “clumsy build up” by the Department of Defense establishing its own policy directives in strategic communication.

Armstrong further posits in an article for Foreign Policy Magazine, “The Pentagon now funds and controls a wide range of foreign-policy and diplomatic priorities – from development to public diplomacy and beyond.” According to him, this betrays the fact that State Department has reached a low (or ‘the bottom’) in its ability to “respond to the new 21st-century paradigm.”

There is growing evidence that the internal machinations of the State Department have corrupted its “core missions” of traditional diplomacy and public diplomacy, illustrated by the conclusions of the GAO report earlier this year, noting a failure by State to reshuffle its bureaus.

He asserts that where the Department of State failed, the Department of Defense stepped up. Citing the example of recent strategic communication operations released by the DoD, Armstrong ventures, “Foggy Bottom relies on Pentagon funding and even personnel for basic operations central to its mission.”

Despite the suggestions by Defense Secretary Robert Gates and the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Adm. Mike Mullen, to use some of the DoD funds toward the State Department, Armstrong recommends that Secretary of State Hilary Clinton should work towards, “aligning the State Department with the Defense Department.”

He warns nonetheless that bureaucracy could impede such efforts and Clinton will need the clear and unequivocal support of the president and more importantly Congress, which authorizes State Department budget, to have a chance at success.

Andrew Bast deplores for World Politics Review that foreign policy institutions have failed to come up with a more efficient way to communicate its strategic message to foreign audiences. Referring to the recent scathing indictment on the state of “Strat Comm” by Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mullen,

Bast concurs that the US suffers from a serious credibility issue.

Above all, Bast indicates as well that DoD is affected by the poor performance of DoS; “State is responsible for communicating the country’s message to the rest of the world. Yet, when it comes to public diplomacy, for years there has been a lack of leadership.”

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Andrew Bast, Analyst and Journalist.

While Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Judith McHale explains that public diplomacy is “not a propaganda contest – it is a relationship race,” she also emphasizes the need to bolster the US’s credibility to forge “an ethic of common purpose.” Although it is a positive step and interesting remark, Bast deplores that it no concrete step has been undertaken.

Matt Armstrong underlines on Mountain Runner that some in Congress have unilaterally decided that 2010 is the year America’s public diplomacy will no longer be influenced by DoD. He notes that the military has been the unwilling (if passionate once engaged) and often clumsy surrogate and partner for the State Department in representing the US and its interests in Africa, the Middle East, and elsewhere around the world.

The Senate defense subcommittee for

appropriations recently weighed in with their cut that will effectively “remove the boots from public diplomacy.” The aim was eventually to contain DoD’s influence over public diplomacy. However, Armstrong suggests that a gap solution could be transitioning activities to be under State leadership even if “sub-contracted” to Defense (a likely gap solution) or to outside contractors.

“There is no disputing that the current situation is undesirable but there must be a transition. Funding is cut, not transferred - the defense appropriators only have the authority to add and subtract,” Armstrong comments. Current and future programs will suffer - including those run by the State Department that are in part or wholly dependent on Defense funding and resources eliminated by the appropriators.

Armstrong believes that it will undermine the stability of US presence and create vacuums that are adversaries will fill and use to show we are not a reliable partner. He continues, “It will take much more time and resources to catch up than if there was an orderly transition from Defense to State.” He also warns that while Defense has wanted the attention to fix its own house, this is more than it wanted as it quite simply threatens the President’s goals for Afghanistan, Africa, and elsewhere.

Bast understands that the heart of the problem may not be limited to leadership and direction, and that it may extend to communication and coordination among the various agencies “independently defining and coordinating strategic communications programs,” he reports for World Politics Review. Bast considers this is an urgent issue that McHale will need to address. Bast adds that there is a dire need for policy to “back up” any message as well.

Although he recognizes that President Obama’s overtures have changed the world’s perception of the US, Bast concludes, “rather than crafting an appealing message, perhaps the best remedy to the bungle that’s been underway for eight years is to simply work on explaining exactly what it is that we’re doing.”

The Legacy of 9/11 from the Arab Lens

The anniversary of the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington, DC has renewed discussion among academics and commentators on the nature and development of US-Arab relations, especially over the past eight years. Many observers are critical of the US government's response directly following the attacks, and in the years since.

Some writers have restated their belief that warmongering politicians in the West have unfairly portrayed Islam—even fundamentalist Islam—as violent and one-dimensional.

“The scale of the attacks and the sense of disbelief created an atmosphere that made it almost impossible for US officials to distinguish between terrorism and Islamism,” writes Damascus University lecturer Marwan Al-Kabalan for Gulf News. He goes on to note that the “violent groups” responsible for the attacks “represent only the fringes of political Islam.”

Ron Smith's assessment for the Baltimore Sun is not only that the US has failed to accomplish anything positive through its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but also “the stated goals of Osama bin Laden seem a lot closer to being met than those of our own leaders.” Smith claims that Al-Qaeda succeeded in their intention to “[force] America into bankruptcy” and wreak havoc on the American psyche.

Johns Hopkins professor Fouad Ajami notes in the Wall Street Journal that although the war in Afghanistan is often touted as more morally justifiable than the invasion of Iraq, in reality that distinction is “intellectually muddled.” He argues that while the Afghan war frequently held up as a multilateral operation, spurred by NATO, in fact European involvement in the conflict has been nominal at best.

“[Saddam Hussein] was a favored son of [Iraq]. The decapitation of his regime was a cautionary tale for his Arab brethren. Grant George W. Bush his due,” Ajami writes. He goes on to say that the inevitable comparisons of Iraq to Vietnam are exaggerated. “This is not Mr. Obama's Vietnam. It is what it is—his

Afghanistan.”

Other commentators highlight the continuing ramifications of the US government's response to the attacks—namely, the US detention center in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

Andy Worthington writes in the Guardian that the detention center is a blight on the American judicial system; “a result of the Bush administration's cavalier approach to the law, and its senseless and illegal approach to the use of torture.”

In an article for the Australian, Leah Farrell observes that the illegal detentions in Guantanamo, along with the alleged torture of detainees, have given the Taliban and Al-Qaeda renewed justification for their anti-Americanism.

“Many people remain angry at America's treatment of detainees. Some would celebrate an evening of the score and perhaps even sanction it. The ends justifies the means is about to blowback on to the Afghan conflict,” Farrell notes.

The Washington Post highlights the already apparent difficulty of keeping the memory of the 9/11 attacks alive for a new generation of Americans. Students currently in high school may have been too young to be aware of the significance of the attacks eight years ago.

A teacher remarks in the Post article that he was one of the first asked to pilot a new curriculum, devised by a 9/11 survivor along with two New York based professors and an education company. The curriculum is intended to serve as a “tribute to the victims,” taking several weeks for student activities such as “building their own September 11 memorials,” constructing maps of terrorist activity, and “debating the cleanup of Ground Zero.”

The Indiana Teacher of the Year profiled in the Post article showed his class the video included in the curriculum, but then decided that a more powerful assignment might be for each student to interview someone who remembered September 11 more clearly.

One writer for the Daily Star writes that there could be a silver lining in the legacy of the Trade Center attacks. Rebecca Cataldi, also a program manager at the International Center for Religion and

Diplomacy, says that one positive effect of 9/11 is the immense surge in interest and information about Islam and the Arab world. She says there was a huge escalation in the numbers of Americans in Arabic and Middle Eastern studies, and Muslims and non-Muslims alike have reached out to each other.

“The scale of the attacks and the sense of disbelief created an atmosphere that made it almost impossible for US officials to distinguish between terrorism and Islamism.”

*Marwan Al-Kabalan,
Damascus University lecturer.*

“In the United States, 9/11 reminded many of us of what's really important... community, compassion toward one's neighbor and service to one's society,” Cataldi writes. “September 11 was a horrific tragedy, but its legacy need not be...We can still choose how to respond to 9/11—by lashing out against each other in violence...or by coming together in peace. The choice is ours.”

Arab Media Changing Arab Culture

The Arab world is so addicted to television that western ideas are starting to transform Arab culture at a pace that

might be too fast, says Dr. Morris Kalliny, a researcher at Missouri University of Science and Technology, according to Breaking News 24/7. “There has been a transition from state-controlled media to almost complete freedom when it comes to accessing information. People are still trying to figure out how to handle it,” the expert added.

Kalliny, who conducts research on advertising and media in the Arab world, observes that most Arabs who can afford a satellite dish have one in their yard. The lack of regulations in this domain has led to thousands of channels becoming available free of charge. Similarly, it benefits the economic development of the industry in the region.

While the economic downturn has jolted the region’s media industry, it has also triggered changes that were long overdue, comments Sam Potter for the Kipp Report. The UAE and Saudi Arabia recorded a downturn in ad revenue (of 6 and 8 percent respectively), and other countries made up for this with significant growth.

According to Potter, the past two years delivered the notion of buying media based on budget power and monopolizing the media space, but 2009 ushered in a culture of wanting to verify the spends and understand how it actually delivers on the bottom line.

Experts argue that younger generations tend to embrace technology and western ideas, while older Arabs are more conservative. “It’s really not much different than in the US. You’re going to get two extremes,” says Kalliny for Breaking News 24/7. And while culturally sensitive materials such as pornography are inaccessible over the internet in some Arab countries, the expert contends that they can be found on satellite TV.

However, Faisal Al-Qasim, journalist for GulfNews, believes that the huge number of Arab satellite TV channels generates confusion on what to watch, and who is who in the television industry. “Over the past decade or so, Arab society has been afflicted with what you could call ‘satellite TV diarrhoea,’” he remarks.

According to Al-Qasim, the satellite industry has become a sort of melting pot for people seeking business interests at

the price of good quality programming, flooding the airwaves with below-average cultural programs that are not going to help the young generation.

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Dr. Morris Kalliny, a researcher at Missouri University of Science and Technology.

An Omani reader agrees with the author. He comments that although the digital satellite era has opened up a new world for television viewers, it does not really lead to the healthy growth of children, who spend a good amount of their time in front of the television sets.

While Al-Qasim deplores the fact that satellite TV stations continue to proliferate, he deplores, “It is difficult to find an Arab investor who has done a thorough feasibility study for the channel that he or she wants to launch.” He explains that most of the hundreds of Arab satellite TV channels have been launched by financiers without knowledge, experience or understanding of the industry, thus accounting for the launch of more than 500 channels over the past ten years.

He further points out that for every fifty channels closed down annually, another fifty are launched, while Arab viewers

tend to watch just a couple of news channels, three or four music stations, two or three drama channels and a couple of religious channels regularly. The rest of the channels are superfluous.

Restriction and better regulations have come to play a useful role among the rise and fall of channels that have no valuable intellectual or cultural content. Al-Qasim concludes that if Arab viewers had difficulty keeping track of programming before, today most viewers simply do not know about the other satellite channels.

Delegitimizing Extremists

Former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs under the Bush Administration, James K. Glassman, argues that the most efficient way to undermine the discourse of extremists is to support moderate Muslims, reports the Asian Tribune. Glassman reiterated his view that public diplomacy “is not about us, and in order to win the war of ideas the US just needs to undermine the message of extremists.”

Although he admits, “Making people like us better is a perfectly decent US goal,” he also remarks that US public diplomacy should thrive to undercut violent extremists by having governments and civil society engage their fellow citizens with a more powerful narrative. Glassman indicates that extremism can be defeated simply by “supporting people who share US interests and by providing them with the means to accomplish their goals.”

US special envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan Richard Holbrooke believes that a more aggressive approach is necessary to deal with extremists, according to Radio Free Europe. Speaking on September 18 at an RFE/RL event in Washington, DC’s Newseum, Holbrooke marked the launch of a new initiative to broadcast six daily hours of programming to Pashto speakers along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

At the event, he stated, “We need to go beyond traditional diplomacy.” He insisted that the best way to counter Taliban propaganda is through the use of Western media broadcast, and that precisely Radio Free Europe aimed to fill

this void in the region.

RFE/RL President Jeffrey Gedmin noted, “Our additional programming will feature a wide range of news, politics, and culture that will reach deep into the Pashtun heartland via radio, SMS text messaging, video, and the Internet.”

The US Congress recently appropriated \$10.9 million to the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which oversees RFE/RL operations, to enhance and expand broadcasts to the Pashtun populations of Pakistan’s border regions, reports Television Washington. The article states that in a volatile area where little independent news and information is available, this new initiative will feature a wide range of news, politics, and cultural programs specifically geared to Pashto speakers on both sides of the border.

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The Taliban is adapting to the media era and the political and religious group has developed increasingly sophisticated strategies to win hearts and minds in the Afghani region. In August, the New York Times quoted Holbrooke as saying that the Taliban have unrestricted, and unchallenged access to the radio, which is still the primary means of communication in Afghanistan and parts of Pakistan, and therefore a vital method of communication between the United States and people of that region, notes the news site.

“This is obviously where RFE and RL come in. We need to explain in open American supported radio stations and other media...why we are [in Afghanistan

and Pakistan], [that we are] as friends and not as invaders or occupiers,” concluded Holbrooke.

Is Al-Qaeda Caving In?

In a tape released two days after the eighth anniversary of the September 11th attacks, Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden reasserted his threat to the United States, calling President Barack Obama “powerless” to stop the war in Afghanistan, reports The Associated Press.

According to Fox News, jihadist forums experienced technical problems on the eve of September 11th. Bin Laden’s audiotape finally disseminated throughout the internet via As-Sahab Media on September 13th, 2009.

Foreign Policy’s Marc Lynch comments on his frustration with locating the tape on the internet, saying that he experienced difficulties downloading the video once he finally located it on a jihadist forum. He remarks that Al-Qaeda “really does have with its distribution mechanisms.”

While Fox News states that Al-Qaeda’s videos have grown in technical sophistication, this latest recording does not enjoy high production values. The video, which simply consists of a recorded voice attributed to Osama Bin Laden and a still image of Al-Qaeda’s leader, is approximately 11 minutes long.

In addition to his commentary on President Obama’s administration and the war in Afghanistan, bin Laden identified America’s support of Israel as the root of the conflict. He asked Americans to reconsider their priorities. According to the SITE Intelligence Group’s translation of the Al-Qaeda leader’s speech, bin Laden said, “Ask yourselves to determine your position: Is your security, your blood... and your reputation dearer to you than the security of the Israelis, their children, and their economy?”

Bin Laden also recommended a couple of texts in his speech, mentioning American authors John Mearsheimer and Steve Walt and their book The Israel Lobby and

US Foreign Policy. In his blog at Foreign Policy, Walt wryly responds to bin Laden’s book recommendation.

He says that bin Laden’s comments about the pro-Israel lobby are “not exactly a news flash” and adds that bin Laden must have missed the part of the Mearsheimer and Walt book which maintains that the United States should still defend the existence of Israel.

How relevant and significant are the contents of Osama bin Laden’s speech, eight years after the tragic events of September 11th?

At Foreign Policy, Stephen Walt claims that if the United States pursued a smarter policy in the Middle East, “Bin Laden’s call to arms would fall on deaf ears and he’d become even more irrelevant than he is today.”

Others take a more cautious approach in analyzing the latest speech and commenting on the last eight years. Lynch views bin Laden’s new approach, which downplays extremist “salafi” themes, as an indication that the radical group may have learned from its past mistakes. He says that bin Laden’s latest speech may better appeal to the mainstream Muslim world, as it focuses on political conflicts rather than polarizing ideological issues.

Peter Henne at The Huffington Post remains wary of dismissing Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden as an insignificant threat. He states that even eight years later, the imminence has faded but the uncertainty remains. Henne says, “Confusing this uncertainty with an actual decline in Al-Qaeda’s significance, however, is misguided.”

He notes that Al-Qaeda still has a presence in countries such as Algeria and Yemen. Henne states that Al-Qaeda’s greatest weapon is its voice and the threat it will hijack discourse in the Muslim world. He applauds American President Barack Obama for his public diplomacy campaign, which may create a positive image of the United States within Muslim societies.

Across the Atlantic, The Telegraph also views the current state of bin Laden, Al-Qaeda, and the Taliban in a pessimistic light. The UK-based newspaper’s website reminds readers that 67 British citizens

were killed in the World Trade Center attacks of September 11th.

The article also mentions a recent case in which three British Muslims were convicted for conspiring to destroy transatlantic airliners using liquid-based bombs. Although the threat appears to be less significant today, The Telegraph uses this case as an example to point out that the security threat posed by terrorism still remains throughout the world. The article concludes, "As that tragic day showed, the enemy is both real and deadly."

Iraqi Shoe Thrower Denounces Torture

After nine months in prison, Muntadhar Al-Zaidi, the Iraqi TV journalist who threw his shoes at former president George W. Bush during a news conference in Baghdad last December to protest the US presence in Iraq, was released on September 15, reports The LA Times. While greeted with a hero's welcome by many in the Arab world, Al-Zaidi held a press conference in which he accused the Iraqi government of abuse and described his motivation to throw his shoes.

"I am not a hero. I admit I have a position and opinion. I was humiliated seeing my country violated and my Baghdad burnt," Al-Zaidi said at the press conference following his release. "I was seeing with my own eyes the victims' pain and the cries of widows and orphans...I vowed to our victims to avenge them and the opportunity came and I did not miss it for every single drop of innocent blood that was caused by the occupation."

"Here I am free and the country is still a prisoner," he added.

Al-Zaidi shouted, "This is your farewell kiss, you dog!" as he threw his shoes at Bush. The incident, replayed numerous times on television, led to Al-Zaidi being sentenced to three years in prison for assault. However, Iraq's judiciary reduced his sentence to one year due to a lack of a prior record and good behavior. The incident was downplayed by the Bush administration but was a point of embarrassment for the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Al-Maliki's government has been "keen to

avoid [Al-Zaidi] being lionized after his release," notes The Guardian.

According to The LA Times, Al-Zaidi has demanded an apology from Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki "for hiding the truth from the people" of the injustices he alleges are being carried out in Iraq's jails. He accused Iraqi government and security personnel of beating, whipping, and shocking him with electricity throughout the first days of his incarceration.

"The Iraqi prime minister was shown in the media saying he did not sleep until he checked on me[...], at these moments when he was speaking I was getting tortured in the most terrible ways possible, by electric shock, beatings by cables, being beaten by steel bars," Al-Zaidi said.

Al-Zaidi's experience in jail stands in contrast to the "hero's welcome" he has received in the days before and after his release, which was delayed one day because "legal procedures in Iraq often see an inmate's liberty delayed for several extra days" due to paperwork processing delays, reports Al-Jazeera. The delay, coupled with the allegations of mistreatment, angered his family, and they threatened to stage a sit-in outside an army base in Iraq.

According to USA Today, Al-Zaidi has received offerings of cash and support. "What (he) did was heroic and deserves all this appreciation from people who hate occupation," said his brother, Maitham Mehdi Jbarah al-Zaidi. USA Today also reports that Al-Zaidi is coming home to a fully furnished two-story villa in a posh section of Baghdad, paid for by the owner of al-Baghdadiya, the TV network which employs Al-Zaidi.

"There is talk of job offers from bigger Arab networks, lavish gifts such as sports cars from businessmen, a celebrity status, and reports that Arab women from Baghdad to the Gaza Strip want his hand in marriage," adds Al-Jazeera.

Not all Iraqis are praising Al-Zaidi, however. Grocery store owner Hussein Oreibi told USA Today, "He should have spent more time in jail to learn how to respect guests."

Khaleej Times, which urges the Iraqi authorities to protect Al-Zaidi from

harm, takes a more balanced, reflective approach: "What Zaidi did in a fit of rage was unfortunate and does not sit well with the legendary Arab tradition of respecting one's guests come what may. However, it is also important to see his reaction in its right perspective. The people of Iraq, and people across the

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Muntazar Al-Zaidi, Iraqi Journalist.

Muslim world, have been devastated and outraged by the reckless and mindless destruction of the land considered the cradle of civilization."

Al-Zaidi's impact extends beyond Iraq and its neighbors. According to The BBC, "'shoe-ing' appears to have become the favored protest statement from Ahmedabad to Latvia." It has been described as the "ultimate non-violent weapon."

UK media lecturer Yasmin Ibrahim, author of "The Art of Shoe-Throwing," argues that the shoe-throwing incident "has been consummately appropriated into popular culture and entertainment in the multimedia platforms of the internet, transforming political images and political

protests into voyeuristic entertainment for the masses,” notes The BBC.

“Pictures of the president ducking have been etched on walls across Baghdad, made into T-shirts in Egypt, and incorporated into children’s games in Turkey,” adds The Guardian.

Shoe-throwing has been seen in Sarajevo, London and Delhi, though none have been as notorious as the incident in Iraq or elicited harsher government responses. Yet, “the speed with which Mr. Zaidi’s protest became a global phenomenon indicates it is unlikely they will go away,” concludes The BBC.

The Saudi Drama That Keeps on Giving

Recent controversy surrounding the Mazen Abdul Jawad case has “opened yet another chapter in the conflict between conservative clerics and rich liberal businessmen” in Saudi Arabia, according to Muhammed Hamza of Bikya Masr.

Last July, Jawad, a local Saudi airline employee and divorced father-of-four, shocked millions when he appeared on LBC’s (Lebanese Broadcasting Corp) “Bold Red Line,” a popular yet controversial talk show, and gave graphic accounts of his sex life and details of intimate interactions with women.

The news site stresses, “In Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam and one of the most conservative countries in the world, no sexual content is allowed on television or in newspapers, magazines or books.” Women are not allowed to be seen on street without being fully covered.

A majority of Saudi citizens were quite upset at hearing how one of their peers “would pick up women in the Kingdom.” The uproar and embarrassment extended to the Saudi government as well in light of the recent investments made by rich Saudi businessmen in satellite television.

Bikya Mar reminds how “Prince Al-Waled

has a substantial stake in Rotana, which runs a variety of channels that present entertainment programs, focusing on Arabic music videos and movies.”

The actions of Jawad on the LBC show last July left the Kingdom’s deputy Prime Minister, Prince Nayif Bin Abd-al-Aziz, no choice but to shut down all LBC offices in the country according to Bikya Masr. It was intended to send a message of no tolerance in such instances.

“Every Saudi who invests in satellite television channels has to feel the national and social responsibility towards the country,” said Abdallah al-Jaser, in charge of media affairs at the Culture and Information Ministry.

But the Jawad case prompted conservative Saudi officials and clerics to act further, using the recent “Red Line” scandal as ammunition to tackle a broader issue- that of discouraging wealthy Saudi businessmen from investing in Satellite TV channels that in the minds of the clerics and officials, act as a bridge for media campaigns promoting offensive Western beliefs.

This puts satellite TV stations such as MBC TV, the ART, Rotana, and Al-Arabiya under financial and political pressure from the Saudi government. In a statement published by the Saudi Okaz newspaper in August, Undersecretary of media affairs at the Culture and Information Ministry Abdullah Al- Jasser urged every Saudi citizen who invests in satellite television channels to be responsible and mindful of Islamic Sharia Law.

He noted that the television channels “violated the Islamic creed and public morals and constituted a serious offense to the kingdom,”

Although he mentioned no one by name, Al-Jasser clearly aimed his recommendation at investors such as Prince Al- Walid bin Talal, Sheikh Salih Kamil, and Sheikh Walid al-Ibrahim; owners of Rotana, Arab Radio and Television Network (ART), and Middle East Broadcasting Centre (MBC), respectively.

Clerics in the country such as Sheikh Saleh Al-Lihedan have in the past attempted to address the issue of media censorship in

their fatwas. But the recent Jawad scandal has given conservative clerics ammunition with which to once again pursue this aggressively.

Requests have been made not to leave management to people who have orientations and ideas that, intentionally or unintentionally, do harm to the kingdom, to Saudi investments, and to Arabs and Muslims.

The TV show row appears to have opened Pandora’s Box for Saudi broadcasters; it has come as a fresh opportunity for conservative clerics to lash out at the Saudi businessmen who own TV channels.

“MBC, Al-Arabiya, ART and Rotana channels are all axes that destroy Islam and Muslims,” Sheikh Yousef bin Abdallah al-Ahmad, lecturer at the Faculty of Shari’ah in the Islamic University of Imam Muhammad bin Saud in Riyadh, was quoted as telling the Al-Dalil religious TV.

In a fatwa issued over a year ago according to MEMRI TV, Al-Lihedan demanded that owners of liberal Arab TV channels be placed on trial and repent. Today we see the call for a more aggressive stance, as other Saudi ulama such as Saudi University Professor Yousuf Al-Ahmad assert “they [owners of Saudi TV channels] should be tried in an Islamic court of law and sentenced to death.”

It remains to be seen what punishment awaits the man who ignited this recent media clash between conservative values and liberal investors. As Mazen Abdul Jawad awaits his trial, set to be soon after Eid Al-Fitr, questions of responsibility and verdicts are emerging.

According to Maktoob Business newsletter, while the chief judge at Jeddah’s summary court believes Jawad’s remarks constitute a moral crime, his lawyers say it is a matter of media infraction and label it an “information issue.” Jawad faces “lashing and jail time” if convicted.

Authorities Lock Horns over Al-Jazeera's Access to Local Jails

Amid the backdrop of the American healthcare debate, Al-Jazeera English ran a special report on September 17, 2009 on the fate of the mentally ill in US jails and prisons. Before Al-Jazeera reporter Josh Rushing (a former US Marine public affairs officer) could illuminate this rarely-reported topic, however, controversy engulfed the investigation, sparking questions of the right to a free press.

On September 5, The Houston Chronicle reported that Jared Woodfill, Chairman of the Harris County Republican Party in Texas, admonished Democratic Sheriff Adrian Garcia for allowing Al-Jazeera into the county jail to cover a story. Harris County trails only Los Angeles and New York City for the largest daily jail population, according to Forbes and numerous other sources.

Al-Jazeera is not the only network covering this issue. For instance, a Forbes report this July notes that the Harris County jails are notoriously used to house homeless people with mental illnesses, which was the reason for Rushing's focus on Houston. Deputy Simon Ramirez says, "Nobody wants to build a mental health hospital. They use jails to warehouse people who have mental health issues."

The Houston Chronicle reports Woodfill saying, in his criticism of the sheriff's decision, "We think it's odd, at best, to have Al-Jazeera going through our jails and actually interviewing folks [...] Second, we don't believe our chief law enforcement officer should be promoting an organization that has been linked to Al-Qaeda and other terrorist or quasi-terrorist organizations. So we thought it was important to let our folks know what was going on."

Sheriff Garcia's office pointed to the lack of evidence behind Woodfill's accusation of terrorist ties, reminding audiences that even the officials at the highest levels of the American government regularly hosted the network for reports.

"We decided that what was good enough for the Bush administration and the Pentagon was good enough for the Harris County Sheriff's Office, and we're proud to have welcomed a US Marine home to Texas so he could do this story," said Alan Bernstein, a spokesman for Garcia. Bernstein noted that the office had "fully vetted" Al-Jazeera's request, finding it to be entirely legitimate.

"We decided that what was good enough for the Bush administration and the Pentagon was good enough for the Harris County Sheriff's Office."

Alan Bernstein, a spokesman for Sheriff Garcia.

In addition to criticizing Sheriff Garcia, Woodfill reportedly urged GOP supporters to "voice concerns" to the sheriff's office, mistakenly listing the number to call as the county's emergency dispatch number. Woodfill later sent an email correcting the error.

Woodfill's argument, which he repeated in a September 9 letter to the editor published in the Houston Chronicle, rests on the accusation that Al-Jazeera has ties to Al-Qaeda. ["] He cited as evidence "the numerous videos Al-Qaida's leader, Osama Bin Laden, provided to Al-Jazeera, which with [sic] willingly played as our soldiers stood in harm's way." He went on to attack reporter Josh Rushing for his criticism of the Bush administration and his reports on religious extremists in the US.

Reader Lyndon Peters of Houston wrote a response to Woodfill's letter in a September 11 letter to the editor. Peters wrote: "Al-Jazeera's status as a

news organization is not invalidated just because it may not report the news the way Woodfill wants it reported. His complaints about Josh Rushing are similarly questionable."

This was not the first such controversy instigated by Jared Woodfill. In 2007, the Houston Chronicle reports that Woodfill came out in angry opposition to the Texas Senate's decision to allow a Muslim cleric to lead prayers around the Christian Easter holiday. "I'm shocked that the day before the Easter recess that a Muslim is leading the prayer," Woodfill said. "They should be having a celebration about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ."

Lyndon Peters' September 11 letter to the editor in The Houston Chronicle brought up an American media network which "has done several stories about the problematic actions of evangelical Christians at the Air Force Academy. According to one 2005 story, Lt. General John Rosa, then the superintendent of the academy, admitted there were real problems around the issue."

The network? CBS. Peters wrote, "For that, I suppose Woodfill would want CBS News banned from Harris County facilities as well."

The Democracy Video Challenge

Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale traveled to the United Nations to participate in the launch of the Second Annual Democracy Video Challenge and to highlight the UN's International Day of Democracy on September 15, reports News Blaze.

The press release states that the Democracy Video Challenge enhances the global dialogue on democracy by asking filmmakers, youth and other citizens of the world to create video shorts that complete the phrase 'Democracy is....' Partners for the online video contest include the State Department, democracy and youth organizations, academia, and the news, film and entertainment industries.

Last year, over 900 videos were submitted from over 95 countries, and the six winners are currently in the United States, touring film studios, the United Nations, and the State Department as a part of their two-week trip to the US.

This year, “a rigorous, independent jury process and online voting open to the public - kind of like American Idol,” stated Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in a jocular tone, in another article by News Blaze.

She continued, “The video submissions represent an extraordinary diversity of ideas and opinions. Even though they demonstrate there are many ways to define democracy, its core meaning is universal.”

The Secretary emphasized that democracy goes beyond the notion of free and fair elections. Although it is a necessary condition, above all democracy provides, “an environment in which people can exercise civil and human rights without fear of persecution or retribution.”

Secretary of State Clinton asserted that this video contest not only stands as a reminder that young people always find new and creative ways to participate in and further democracy, but that the US “wants to keep the dialogue on democracy going forward.”

The Secretary then observed that this next generation of young people is more connected and consequently better able to communicate across oceans and boundaries, thus transcending the purpose of democracy.

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