



Obama Reaching Out to the Arab World

President Barack Obama gave his first formal television interview as US president yesterday to Al-Arabiya, the Dubai-based satellite network, reports *Time* magazine. Expressing optimism about the prospect of peace between Israel and the Palestinians, he cautioned that a peace accord will take time and require new thinking about the problems of the Middle East as a whole.

President Obama also laid out a new approach towards the Arab world during his interview with Al-Arabiya. "I do think that it is impossible for us to think only in terms of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and not think about what is happening with Syria, or Iran, or Lebanon, or Afghanistan and Pakistan," he commented. He also emphasized the numerous challenges ahead for peace in the region.

Even more significant is that the first interview granted by the president was to an Arab channel, signaling a will to listen and engage with the Arab world, comments Mark Lynch for *Foreign Policy*. "In his conversation with the estimable Hisham Milhem, Obama reached out directly to the Arab public via the Saudi TV station Al-Arabiya," remarks Lynch.

Noted as a new start with the Muslim world, the president stressed the importance of public diplomacy in presenting a new image to the Arab world, moving past the "clash of civilizations" and "war on terror" that characterized the Bush administration.

Although reactions to the interview were

largely positive, reports the *Los Angeles Times*, Fawaz Traboulsi, columnist for the Lebanese newspaper *As-Safir*, disagrees. "It is strange to see [Obama] address the Arab world and not have a word to say about the plight of the people in Gaza or the embargo on the Gaza Strip," comments Traboulsi.

Referring to special envoy to the Middle East, George Mitchell, Traboulsi argues that his success in Northern Ireland rested mainly on listening to the demands of the Catholics in order to have the IRA disarm. Traboulsi suggests that the situation is similar with the Palestinians, "who want self-determination and to build their own state."

While some bloggers suggested that there was an opportunity for a turning point in US-Arab relations, others argued that if the Obama White House doesn't strongly support a Palestinian state it will be as ill-received as the Bush administration.

Mark Lynch points out that President Obama's choice of conducting the interview with Al-Arabiya is a clear message to the US government-owned channel Al-Hurra. Choosing Al-Arabiya "is as clear a statement as it is possible to make of Al-Hurra's failure," posits Lynch.

The former administration invested more than half a billion dollars in Al-Hurra, notes *Pro-Publica*. Al-Hurra, and its sister radio station Radio Sawa, were meant to showcase US foreign policy in the Middle East and compete with Al-Jazeera and other networks including Al-Arabiya.

Public Diplomacy at a Crossroad

Speaking at *The George Washington University*, Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs James Glassman outlined his vision for the future of US public diplomacy. Glassman argued that future public diplomacy should have four main pillars.

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Firstly, traditional public diplomacy that puts Americans “face to face with foreigners” through exchange programs, educational scholarships and English-language teaching, is still relevant. Glassman conceded that the cutbacks of “the early 2000s have hurt us badly.”

Secondly, a shift toward global strategic engagement (GSE) or a “battle of ideas,” needs to continue. Thirdly, Glassman highlighted the importance of improving “cooperation and synchronization within the interagency –that is, government-wide.”

Lastly, Public Diplomacy 2.0 helps the US create a conversation in which it acts as “facilitator and convener.” Importantly, Glassman sees PD 2.0 as the death knell of terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda. “This new virtual world is democratic. It is an agora. It is not a place for a death cult that counts on keeping its ideology sealed off from criticism.”

The US needs to “reframe and renew what America stands for.”

Jack Leslie, writing in Brand Republic.

Glassman concludes that the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy should be involved, “on the takeoffs, not just the crash landings,” and that the position is a national security job, not a public relations job. Glassman’s views coincide with the General Accountability Office (GAO), which has listed public diplomacy and strategic communication as the fifth most important issue for the Obama administration, according to the *Washington Post*.

The GAO report notes that “in today’s highly volatile global environment, it is

more critical than ever that the United States effectively coordinate, manage and implement its public diplomacy and strategic communications activities to affect foreign public opinion.”

In the *Los Angeles Times*, Joseph Nye echoes the GAO’s findings. Nye argues that ‘smart power’, the combination of hard and soft power, should lead the US to export optimism and hope, not fear. Nye notes that Secretary of Defense Robert Gates agrees with his smart power formulation. “I am here to make the case for strengthening our capacity to use soft power and for better integrating it with hard power.”

For Nye, the US can use smart power by reinvesting in global public goods such as development, public health and climate change.

Jack Leslie, writing in *Brand Republic*, claims that the US needs to “reframe and renew what America stands for.” Through harnessing new technologies, Leslie argues that the US needs “a strong message communicated in an inspirational and disciplined way.” To do so, the US needs to spend more on soft power according to Leslie, who complains that the US currently spends \$350 million annually on public diplomacy, “the equivalent of what the Pentagon spends about every six hours.”

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has also utilized Nye’s smart power formulation. John Worne at the *USC Center on Public Diplomacy* highlights Clinton’s support of smart power. According to Clinton, “the full range of tools at our disposal,” ranges from “diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal and cultural.”

While Worne argues for the importance of cultural relations, he acknowledges that “the words culture and power – however smart – sit uneasily together,” particularly as cultural diplomacy, “framed to exert power, risks feeling like cultural imperialism – or aggressive boasting.” Thus, Worne emphasizes cultural relations based on “sharing” and “genuine people-to-people engagement.”

Also at the *USC Center on Public Diplomacy*, Nicholas Cull suggests that the US appoint a “cultural tsar.” Cull explains that “arts can help transcend international barriers as well as domestic barriers of race, class and gender.” Indeed, “cultural relations are not about business, not about governments, not about institutions, they’re about people,” says Martin Davidson of the British Council on Kim Andrew Elliott’s *blog*.

Al-Jazeera Expands Outreach to the US; A Lebanese Deal for Al-Jazeera

Al-Jazeera confirmed the deal to launch Worldfocus, a syndicated nightly news program produced in New York and distributed throughout the United States, reports *Reuters*. This would enable the Arabic-speaking international news network, which as of now is available only through DISH Network, to expand its reach to the US.

Worldfocus, hosted by former NBC News correspondent Martin Savidge, is produced by New York City public broadcaster WLIW and syndicated to a number of Public Broadcasting Service affiliates, as well as other stations in 60 US markets, including 27 of the top 30.

Originally criticized by the US government for alleged biased reporting during the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Al-Jazeera has taken on a mission of expansion. According to *Reuters*, Al-Jazeera “plans to begin running ads in several weeks that a spokesman said will address misconceptions about the network in the United States.”

The deal marks another step for Al-Jazeera English as it increases exposure of its award-winning news coverage to millions of new US households, according to *Multichannel News*. “We look forward to giving more Americans around the country

a glimpse into the groundbreaking news coverage that Al-Jazeera routinely offers to audiences in over 100 countries around the world, 24-hours a day, 7 days a week,” states Kimeran Daley, Al-Jazeera’s head of North American distribution sales.

Al-Jazeera is also expanding its presence on the internet, with a YouTube channel, a Twitter feed focused on the war in Gaza and free broadcasts online at ‘Livestation’. The Qatari news channel has increased its marketing campaign, particularly during Israel’s air and ground offensive into Gaza that began about three weeks ago, notes *News Teevee*.

Al-Jazeera has recently partnered with independent journalists to share footage of the military conflict in Gaza to serve as a starting point for the Creative Commons Repository - a forum that eventually will feature various Creative Commons-licensed clips.

The project offers two advantages, comments News Teevee. Firstly, footage for commercial purposes can be reused by other networks. Secondly, it makes rare footage from Gaza more accessible. “Israel has been banning foreign media organizations from Gaza, which makes the Al-Jazeera footage even more valuable,” adds the site.

The news site claims that this initiative will help Al-Jazeera in “winning America’s heart and minds.” Until recently, the network has struggled to gain a foothold in the US market.

Among the various media outlets that have signed on to the initiative, *The Independent* has signed a deal to run Al-Jazeera English video news reports on its website. This represents the paper’s latest partnership aimed at beefing up its online content.

Jimmy Leach, editorial director for *The Independent*, explains, “Al-Jazeera will enable us to bring a different world-view to our audience. That sort of broad-minded approach to interpreting world opinion will sit perfectly with our readers.”

Tony Burman, managing director of Al-Jazeera English, said that the agreement with *The Independent* extended the broadcaster’s mission to make its content accessible to international audiences through different distribution channels.

“Gaza ... was a breakthrough opportunity to make an impact with people who are less aware of Al-Jazeera than we’d like,” said Burman in an interview with *Associated Press*. While other major international networks were banned by Israel from entering Gaza, Al-Jazeera enjoyed the advantage of having local reporters in the strip throughout the conflict.

“Baraem, unique among some 550 channels in the Arab world, addresses pre-school-aged children, their parents and their teachers, with the ambition of contributing to the formation of the identity of the Arab child.”

Mahmoud Bouneb, executive general manager of JCC and Baraem.

Overall, Al-Jazeera’s video stream saw a 600% jump in worldwide viewership during the Gaza offensive with about 60% of those hits coming from the United States, according to the news organization.

The rise in viewership reflects wider trends in global media, “where the web

increasingly is the place where viewers go to watch video and social networking sites and citizen journalism are merging with traditional news coverage,” reports the Associated Press.

A Lebanese Deal for Al-Jazeera

Al-Jazeera has secured distribution for five of its channels, including Al-Jazeera Arabic and Al-Jazeera English, with the Lebanese cable operators EConet and Cablevision, reports *World Screen*. This is the first time that the Middle Eastern broadcaster has bundled its free-to-air channels in the Lebanese market, where piracy has been a problem for the company, notes *The Peninsula*.

“These agreements further strengthen our presence in Lebanon and are testament to Al-Jazeera Network’s position as the Arab World’s most watched and trusted broadcaster,” says Phil Lawrie, Al-Jazeera’s Director of Global Distribution.

Al-Jazeera for Pre-Schoolers

Baraem, a new satellite channel housed within Al-Jazeera Children’s Channel (JCC), recently launched, reports *TBI Vision*. The channel, translated as ‘the very little ones’, will accompany Al-Jazeera Children’s Channel’s existing children network and will target three- to six-year olds.

With distribution on Nilesat, Arabsat and HotBird satellites, the channel will be available free-to-air across the Arab world and throughout most of Europe. “This is the first pan-Arabic offering for Arab children,” notes Mahmoud Bouneb, executive general manager of JCC and Baraem.

The channel will broadcast a wide variety of programming from educational shows to comic and automated animations. The channel is entirely funded by the Qatar

Foundation, established by the Emir of Qatar in 1995. The annual combined budget for the existing children's channel and Baraem is \$100 million a year, according to TBI.

Noimo Oilwoya of *Gulf Times* comments that Baraem also features an interactive website, *baraem.tv*, that provides mothers and nurseries with cognitive children's games, educational tools and activities that help to provide preschoolers with the appropriate knowledge of Arabic writing and language.

"We are featuring programs that portray natural relationship within the family, between parents, especially mothers and their children and the natural environment. We also want to emphasize the importance of the Arabic language as a means of communication," explains Bouneb.

Just in the past month, "hundreds of Egyptian Facebook members... have set up Gaza-related 'groups,' ...most [expressing] hatred for Israel and the United States."

New York Times.

Fifteen percent of program content is being produced in-house while 85% is carefully selected from international

production houses matching the channel's editorial policy and broadcast guidelines, adds Bouneb. Acknowledging the fact that producing children's programming is one of the most difficult tasks in the television industry, Bouneb also urged parents to find time to sit with their children when they watch television to serve as their guide in understanding the content of the program.

In an interview with *Agence France Presse*, Bouneb further commented, "Baraem, unique among some 550 channels in the Arab world, addresses pre-school-aged children, their parents and their teachers, with the ambition of contributing to the formation of the identity of the Arab child."

Gaza Conflict Spreads to Cyberspace

"Social media [has taken] its place as the newest weapon in the modern arsenal, nestled next to laser-guided missiles and Qassam rockets," reports Helen Kennedy of the *Daily News*. Over the past month, Facebook, Flickr and Twitter have become new vehicles of aggression in the Gaza conflict as "Israelis and Palestinians [have found] cyberspace fertile ground for a propaganda war."

The Israeli Defense Forces have made multiple online efforts to deflect international focus from the suffering of the Palestinians, including posting videos of "weapons caches discovered in mosques" and "schools with complex booby-traps" on their own YouTube channel. However, Palestinian digital counter-efforts depicting gory videos have understandably proved to be far more poignant and effective, "giving [them] an edge in the online war that they didn't have against Israeli real-world might."

Furthermore, "The Israeli Consulate in New York made history by taking questions at a news conference from Twitter users, and answering via Twitter, a popular online service that allows users to broadcast 140-character messages to each

other," Helen Kennedy continues.

Meanwhile, Hamas "unveiled its own YouTube knockoff called Palutube.com," an Arabic language site showing a series of videos with gruesome details of maimed people and dead children and infants.

Pro-Israeli attempts to accrue international support over the internet have not stopped there. Many Israeli bloggers created a site targeting the English-speaking world called HelpUsWin, which encourages other net-surfers to vote in online polls, leave anti-Palestinian comments on pertinent online articles, and install an 'I (heart) Israel' icon on their Facebook pages.

Riyaad Minty, *Al Jazeera's* new media analyst, notes that this internet-based "War of Words" allows "the average, frustrated person on the street to express their views." Blogs, such as the one written by Palestinian CARE aid worker Jawad Harb, have made it easy for interested and concerned readers from across the world to gain exposure to first-hand accounts of the carnage.

Yigal Schleifer of *The Christian Science Monitor* reported that recent online efforts from both sides are influencing "public opinion in an unprecedented and sometimes worrisome way." For instance, Palestinian hackers "successfully [redirected] traffic from several high-profile Israeli websites to a page featuring anti-Israel messages."

On the Israeli side, an online collective group known as *Help Israel Win* even encouraged users to download a program that "would enlist their computer in an online effort to overload Palestinian websites." Another Israeli online organization "has employed various methods to remove or disable Facebook groups that, it says, are clearly anti-Semitic or actively promote Islamic terrorism or genocide."

Samantha Shapiro focused on Egypt's ongoing "Facebook revolution" in the *New York Times* article. Just in the past month, "hundreds of Egyptian Facebook members... have set up Gaza-related 'groups,' ...most [expressing] hatred

for Israel and the United States.” Other Egyptian Facebookers “saw Gaza as a way to stoke and focus discontent against [Egyptian President Hosni] Mubarak and his government.”

Many Egyptian youth view “Egypt’s relationship with Israel as one symptom of a larger set of problems, such as censorship, corruption, joblessness and government incompetence, whose solution would lie not in resistance in Gaza but in democratization at home.”

Political parties have also attempted to disseminate their stances on the Gaza conflict through online avenues. In a particularly interesting case, “the Hadash party’s internet sites offer different messages about the recent war in Gaza depending on whether you view them in Hebrew or Arabic,” reports Yoav Stern on *Haaretz.com*.

The Arabic version of the Jewish-Arab party’s site “quotes a senior party official proclaiming ‘we are with the resistance everywhere’ – a statement that could be interpreted as support for Palestinian terror organizations.” On the contrary, “the party’s two Hebrew-language Web sites denounce the war without expressing support for terrorist organization.” Hadash has since issued statements rejecting accusations of having a contradictory platform.

Guantanamo Closure Raises Questions

In one of its first actions, the Obama administration instructed military prosecutors to seek a 120-day suspension of legal proceedings involving detainees at the naval base at Guantanamo Bay, reports the *Washington Post*.

The legal maneuver appears designed to provide the Obama administration with time to refashion the prosecution system and potentially treat detainees as criminal defendants in federal court or have them

face charges of war crimes in military courts-martial. The news site adds that it is also possible that the administration could reform and relocate the military commissions before resuming trials.

Obama’s swift move on the second day of his presidency is the latest sign of his determination to unleash fundamental political reform and represents a change in how the United States handles Al-Qaeda suspects, according to *Agence France Presse (AFP)*.

“So, the easy part, in all due respect, is to say we’re going to close Guantanamo, because you’re going to run into a NIMBY [not in my backyard] problem here in the United States of America.”

Arizona Senator John McCain.

Military officials were for the most part disappointed as they hoped to make an example of this “legal netherworld,” notes the *Washington Post*. However, others from civil rights movements saw it as an opportunity to restore credibility in the legal system.

“This is a good step in the right direction, although we still think that the unconditional withdrawal of all charges and shutting down this tainted system is

warranted,” said Jamil Dakwar, director of the human rights program at the American Civil Liberties Union.

Global opinion turned dramatically against US use of the facility. Organizations such as Amnesty International called it a “gulag,” and both President Obama and his former opponent Sen. John McCain said that they wanted the facility closed.

Former vice president Richard B. Cheney said late last year that Guantanamo should be kept open until “the end of the war on terror” - a time, he noted, that “nobody can specify.” President Obama has acknowledged in recent interviews that shutting the facility is likely to be prolonged and complex.

Obama’s order to close the Guantanamo Bay prison was welcomed across the world. Nevertheless, rights groups and legal experts wonder what to do with the 245 detainees still held there, points out AFP. An official also said that the administration could not imagine sending 17 Muslim Uighur inmates at Guantanamo back to China, adding that no detainee would be sent back to a nation where they could face persecution.

More than 800 men and teenagers have passed through Guantanamo since it was opened on January 11, 2002, and around 245 remain there, reports AFP. Some outgoing Bush administration officials rejected accusations that tactics used at Guantanamo amounted to torture and argued that the camp and US interrogation tactics such as “waterboarding” yielded useful intelligence.

However, recent reports that former Guantanamo detainee and Saudi national Ali Al-Shiri is believed to be a key leader of Al-Qaeda in Yemen complicates the debates about closing Guantanamo, comments *CNN*. The Defense Department recently estimated that more than 60 terrorists released from Guantanamo may have returned to the battlefield.

According to the magazine *Sada al-Malahem*, published by Al-Qaeda in

Yemen, Al-Shiri attended a media session with Yemeni Al-Qaeda commander Abu Baseer, reports CNN. The magazine noted that Al-Shiri was released from Guantanamo more than 10 months ago.

In addition to the issue of freed detainees engaging in terrorism, the housing of detainees in prisons inside the United States concerns many. Rep. Bill Young of Florida said he has “quite a bit of anxiety” about the possibility of transferring detainees to US facilities.

“So, the easy part, in all due respect, is to say we’re going to close Guantanamo,” Senator John McCain said before adding, “because you’re going to run into a NIMBY [not in my backyard] problem here in the United States of America.”

“We have identified a number of possible prisons here in the United States” that could take the detainees, said Defense Secretary Robert Gates. However, he concludes that enthusiasm for prisoner transfer is very limited.

Gaza Violence Creating Rift

The effects of the Israeli offensive in Gaza are spreading to Europe, according to Bruce Crumley in *Time*. In France, a country of 6 million Muslims and 600,000 Jews, “you have members of communities staging attacks against one another as proxies for violence in the Middle East.”

Firebomb attacks on synagogues in Paris and Strasbourg led French President Nicholas Sarkozy to declare, “our country will not tolerate international tension mutating into inter-community violence.”

Elizabeth Piper, writing for *Reuters*, notes that trouble in France also extended to the Venezuelan embassy, whose walls had been vandalized with “Israel will win” - a response to Venezuela’s decision to cut ties with Israel following the Gaza invasion.

Prime Minister Francois Fillon denounced

the violence, arguing, “We’re not in Israel, we’re not in Palestine, we’re in France. And in France there are no communities because we’re all citizens equal before the law.”

In Britain, Communities Secretary Hazel Blears voiced fears of events in Gaza being used by those who “peddle pernicious extremist views to draw particularly vulnerable young people into that kind of extremism.”

“You have members of communities staging attacks against one another as proxies for violence in the Middle East.”

Bruce Crumley in Time.

Citing attacks on Jews in France, Britain, Denmark, Italy, Greece, Sweden and Spain, *The Brussels Journal’s* Soeren Kern warns, “anti-Semitic violence is becoming more commonplace in every country in Europe.”

Kern argues, “the fine line between valid criticism of Israel and anti-Semitism has been dangerously blurred.” As evidence, Kern uses polling data from Germany, where 50% of respondents equate Israeli policies towards the Palestinians with Nazi treatment of the Jews, and 68% agree that Israel is waging a “war of extermination” against the Palestinian people.

Kern blames what he sees as Europe’s “leftwing mass media establishment,” which leaves European publics,

“bombarded with round-the-clock, knee-jerk, anti-Israel political bigotry disguised as news coverage.”

Beyond Europe, writers have begun debating the effect of the Gaza crisis on the Middle East as a whole. Paul Dakiki, writing for *Asia News*, argues that Hamas now faces a choice between returning to its “Arab family” and continuing to be “a weapon in the hands of Tehran.”

In Dakiki’s view, the Arab world’s response to the Gaza crisis has illuminated the rift between Egypt and Syria, who remain “as far apart as they have ever been.” This leaves the Arab world “far more divided than it has been in decades,” demonstrating a continued “inability to present a unified front despite the rhetoric paid at the altar of Arab unity.”

Marwan Kabalan also writes on Arab discord in an article for *GulfNews*. He notes that the Syrian-Iranian alliance moves from strength to strength, “an unusual exception to the volatile politics of the Middle East.” According to Kabalan, the Israeli attack on Hamas is part of a long-term strategy to weaken and ultimately break the Syrian-Iranian pact.

However, Kabalan sees the Israeli attack and continued American pressure on the alliance as a unifying factor. Kabalan describes the Syrian-Iranian relationship as a classic alliance “justified by threat perceptions more than commonalities, similar culture or values.”

Finally, Yehezkel Dror describes the prospects for long-term peace in the region in *Haaretz*. Dror sees the Israeli offensive as a symptom of a much deeper malaise in Israeli strategic thinking.

Dror laments Israel’s “inability to engage in multi-dimensional thinking of the kind anchored in an understanding that immediate events are the result of historical processes.” According to Dror, this has led Israel to construct superficial policies that “focus on clearly visible phenomena without delving deeper.”

Obama Appeals to the Muslim World

Future US public diplomacy towards the Muslim world has been the subject of debate following the inauguration speech of President Obama. In the speech the president appealed to the Muslim world for a “new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect.”

Writing for *Foreign Policy*, Marc Lynch said Obama’s words “struck me as a remarkably mature, frank and effective appeal to a suspicious but hopeful Islamic world to engage respectfully, as equals and not as supplicants.” Lynch adds that many Arab newspapers also seized on Obama’s promise to begin responsibly withdrawing from Iraq.

Rob Asghar also focuses on Obama’s inauguration speech in an article for the *USC Center on Public Diplomacy*. Asghar sees “great intentionality” in the manner and ordering in which Obama described the US as “a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus – and non-believers.” Further, Obama’s refusal to allow the US to become a “scapegoat” for those seeking to maintain power “has broad ramifications for how the US will relate to the Muslim world,” according to Asghar.

Amidst the debates about the future scope and influence of US public diplomacy in the region, the Israeli offensive in Gaza has reinvigorated discussion about US challenges in the Arab world. In an article for *Countercurrents*, Sonia Nettnin claims the Gaza conflict has handed Obama “a diplomatic arm burned by the white phosphorous, artillery shells that rained down on Gaza.” Nettnin highlights the \$3 billion in direct foreign assistance Israel receives from the US, of which about 75% has been military aid. Nettnin thus propounds, “Americans have made possible Israel’s occupation of the Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza.”

Weighing in on this issue, Marc Lynch

argues that “no amount of public diplomacy can cover for a poorly conceived policy... more aggressively marketing or spinning that policy isn’t really going to help.”

“Americans have made possible Israel’s occupation of the Palestinians in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza.”

Sonia Nettnin, reporter for Countercurrents.

Though acknowledging the views of other public diplomacy scholars such as Kim Andrew Elliott who argue that “sometimes the best public diplomacy is sparse public diplomacy,” Lynch maintains that US silence on the Gaza crisis has left a vacuum for others to exploit. “If the US isn’t at the table, all the easier for them to win the framing battle.”

George J. Mitchell, the New Middle East Envoy

US President Barack Obama’s administration named George J. Mitchell special envoy to the Middle East last week, prompting mixed reactions from Israeli and Palestinian supporters.

According to the *New York Times*, Mitchell, a former Senate majority leader and chairman of a Middle East peace commission in 2001, signals that “[President] Barack Obama was attaching a high priority to the Middle East and the current Gaza crisis from his first days in

office.”

Upon his appointment, Mitchell said, “The situation in the Middle East is volatile, complex and dangerous. But the president and the secretary of state [Hillary Clinton] have made it clear that danger and difficulty cannot cause the United States to turn away,” writes *CNN*.

“The appointment of a high-level envoy like Mitchell may be intended to create the impression of intense administration activity when, in reality, the new president hopes to just keep the conflict from boiling over while focusing on more immediate problems like the tanking economy and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan,” some observers told *Jewish Week*.

Mitchell, who is of Irish and Lebanese descent, helped broker the “Good Friday” agreement in Northern Ireland and led an international commission to investigate the causes of violence in the Middle East. Its report, published in 2001, “called for a freeze on Israeli settlements in the West Bank and a Palestinian crackdown on terrorism,” wrote the *New York Times*.

The appointment of Mr. Mitchell is a strong suggestion “that Obama is going to free himself of the exclusive relationship that we’ve had with the Israelis,” said Aaron David Miller, a public policy analyst at the Woodrow Wilson International Center, to *Jewish Week*. “They’re trying to inject more balance into the Israeli-US relationship.”

Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League, told *Jewish Week*, “Sen. Mitchell is fair...but the fact is, American policy in the Middle East hasn’t been even handed – it has been supportive of Israel when it felt Israel needed critical US support.”

According to David Harris, executive director of the American Jewish Committee, “Managing the current conflict and laying the groundwork for a more extensive peace process once conditions have improved” may confirm Mitchell as the appropriate, long term choice. “He has the respect of both sides, and he would

have direct access to top administration officials, which is very important.”

Mitchell’s lack of personal connections to Israel and a reputation for building relationships with all parties in negotiations is a change and could spark opposition from some pro-Israel groups who have grown accustomed to the hands-off approach of the former Bush administration.

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*Morton Klein,
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“[Mitchell] made it clear he sympathized with the Palestinian position over the Israeli position, and blamed Israel more than the Palestinians for the lack of progress toward peace,” Morton Klein, president of the Zionist Organization of America, told *Jewish Week*. “We will be expressing our strong concerns that this appointment would be a mistake. It would send an additional message that Obama is going to pressure Israel more than the Palestinians.”

According to MJ Rosenberg, policy

director for the Israel Policy Forum, pro-Israel groups “favor the kind of mediator with the least prospects of success. George Mitchell worries them because he was so successful in Northern Ireland, a success that was built on his persistence and his utterly impartiality ... and a deal means Israeli concessions which they have never favored. The stronger the candidate for envoy or mediator — the more of an honest broker he or she would be -- the more uncomfortable they are.”

Yet, Diane Balsler, executive director of Brit Tzedek v’Shalom, believes that Jewish voters anticipated the change. “They knew they were voting for a candidate [Obama] who stresses diplomacy and not military solutions. They understood they were voting for a break with current policy,” she told *Jewish Week*.

For his part, Mitchell believes in the possibility of coexisting Jewish and Palestinian states and an end to the conflict, says *CNN*. “From my experience [in Northern Ireland], I formed the conviction that there is no such thing as a conflict that can’t be ended. Conflicts are created, conducted and sustained by human beings. They can be ended by human beings,” remarked Mitchell.

Arabic Media Shack remains cautious. “Simply appointing someone to be an envoy, in itself, will not be perceived by the Arab states as significant, unless it’s followed by a serious sustained campaign with the clear backing of the highest levels of the administration.”

Gaza War Crimes

In an interview with Tony Cross, correspondent for *Radio France Internationale*, former Palestinian Information Minister Mustafa Bargouti has accused the international media of “complicity” in Israel’s Gaza offensive due to their “silence” on Israel’s ban on journalists entering Gaza.

Bargouti claims Israel’s infringement of the “basic principles of the free press” is an

attempt to cover up war crimes violations. “They’re trying to hide the fact that this is not a war on an army, it’s a criminal war against a civilian population with a totally disproportionate power between the two sides and with the use of prohibited equipment and prohibited weapons.”

According to Bargouti, these prohibited weapons include the illegal use of white phosphorous. “It’s not ‘alleged’ when you can see it on TV, so clear, and you see the results of it, burns on people’s faces.”

Bargouti’s claims are supported by the US-based Human Rights Watch, who argues that the use of the chemical in densely-populated areas violates international legal requirements on its use, which require avoidance of civilian injury and death.

To conclude, Bargouti implores European countries to end military purchases from Israel, which he describes as a “war criminal country.”

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*Former Palestinian
Information Minister
Mustafa Bargouti on the
use of white Phosphorous
by Israel on Palestinian
populations.*

In Britain too, allegations against Israel’s military conduct have surfaced. The ‘Letters’ section of London’s *The Guardian* newspaper contains contributions from prominent academics and musicians. In

response to the content of this section, Michael Coren of Canada's *National Post* dismissed the UK's "hysterical opposition to the Jewish state [which] has become a national fashion."

Nonetheless, one letter to *The Guardian*, signed by over 300 university academics, accuses Israel of "ongoing appropriation of [Palestinian] land and resources," and of turning "Gaza and the West Bank into a pair of gigantic political prisons." The academics suggest a policy of "boycott, divestment and sanctions" against Israel by the British government and its people until Israel withdraws from Gaza and retreats to its 1967 borders.

Additionally, a letter signed by over 25 musicians labels "Israel's indiscriminate killing in Gaza as a crime against humanity." The musicians thus "protest against Israel's exterminating tactic."

However, as Anita Rice writes for *Al-Jazeera*, any prosecution of either Israeli or Hamas officials as war criminals is fraught with difficulty, even if evidence of war crimes being committed is proven. "There is a world of difference between establishing that war crimes have been committed, and then holding those responsible to account."

Mark Ellis, executive director of the International Bar Association (IBA), says that the International Criminal Court would ordinarily deal with any war crimes investigations. However, the ICC "doesn't have jurisdiction over this conflict... because Israel has not signed up to the Rome Statute [that enshrined the ICC]," and Gaza is not formally recognized as a state.

Similarly, the International Court of Justice lacks the requisite enforcement powers to bring prosecution, as its previous inability to force Israel to rectify elements of the Gaza separation wall demonstrated.

Ellis notes that recourse to the Geneva Conventions is also unlikely, as the Conventions would require Israel or the Palestinians to try their own citizens or

soldiers.

In response to complaints by the Arab Federation of Lawyers (AFL), Israeli spokesman Mark Regev insisted that Israel takes "extremely seriously any allegation of either improper or illegal behavior by servicemen in combat and carries out its own investigations."

Citizen Journalism Online

In today's society, the public is becoming increasingly able to participate in the media and, more specifically, in journalism. Arvind Nair of the *Gulf Times* writes that "journalism has evolved rapidly and will change immensely over the coming years with the public increasingly participating in providing news because of technology."

Blogs, citizen journalism and social networking are known as "new media," and in a panel hosted by the Supreme Council of Information and Communication Technology, Dean Richard Roth of Northwestern University in Qatar said that "the future of journalism will involve the audience much more, as sources of information and as participants in the news-gathering operations."

When professional journalism is intermixed with citizen blogging, finding trustworthy news stories may prove to be difficult. According to *Gulf News*, Mohammad Yousuf, secretary general of the UAE's Journalists' Association, said that "unless special steps are taken to improve the credibility and the contents of reports on the [internet], human community will soon lose an efficient way of communicating news."

Therefore, the Journalists' Association has chosen to provide legal support to bloggers as long as they adhere to the "ethical and professional rules of the profession," such as "offering a level playing field for different parties related to the issue" and maintaining the integrity of an individual or institution unless evidence suggests

otherwise. This initiative taken by the UAE to grant legal support for bloggers is the first of its kind in the world.

According to Martin Manurung of *Global Voices Online*, bloggers in Indonesia offer a more mature, knowledgeable account of current events, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, than the Indonesian mainstream media. He states that the Indonesian media defines the struggle in the Gaza strip as "the enemy of Islam" subduing fellow Muslims.

However, Manurung believes that Indonesian bloggers see the conflict from a different, more informed perspective. The bloggers he cites, such as Anindito Baskoro Satrianto and Gantyo Koespradono, write that the conflict is not so much one of religion as it is of humanity, and that in Palestine there are both Muslims and Christians fighting together for the country's freedom.

He concludes with the statement that "the struggle of Palestinians is a fight for freedom and the war is not a religious conflict. Indonesian bloggers seem to be more informed and mature than most of the Indonesian media."

Meanwhile, Dean Wright of *Reuters* provides examples of readers accusing Reuters of taking pro-Israeli stances in articles concerning the struggle in Gaza. They claim that "Israel [must have] some control over Reuters" and that its "pro-Israel news coverage of Gaza is shockingly evil."

Others blame Reuters for having a "pro-Palestinian slant," and none applaud the journalists for providing information regarding both sides of the issue. Reuters editor-in-chief David Schlesinger states that "getting it right and giving a true picture of the situation is fundamental" to the mission of Reuters.

Reuters Jerusalem bureau chief Alastair Macdonald claims that, for the most part, reporters in the area have the freedom to report independently and without external pressure or influence.

Conversely, not everyone agrees that journalism needs to be impartial. John Press, as stated in the *American Chronicle*, believes quite the opposite. To him, neutral reporting is not a necessity but the problem. Press argues that journalists need to be “culturist;” they need to “have a side and stick up for it.”

He claims, “Culturism affirms that we have a core culture and need to protect it.” Since, according to Press, the Islamic side is already culturist, the United States must be culturist as well in order to survive.

State Department Reform under Hillary

The recent confirmation of Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State provided glimpses into the future direction of public diplomacy in the Obama administration with both US and Arab media outlets weighing in on the potential shift.

Secretary Clinton emphasized the role of diplomacy in her *confirmation hearing*, stating, “with smart power, diplomacy will be the vanguard of our foreign policy,” notes *Juan Cole* of the Global Americana Institute. The foreign policy of the new administration must be based on a “marriage of principles and pragmatism, not rigid ideology,” continued the Secretary.

London’s pan-Arab newspaper *Al-Hayat* wrote, “Gone was the tone of confrontation and ideological rhetoric that characterized the foreign policy of the United States over the last eight years.” Commenting on this article, *Juan Cole* suggested that “you can only imagine how much more eager the Arab world is to have a new team in Washington.”

In terms of the future Middle East policy in particular, Secretary Clinton firstly explicated a “strategy of smart power in the Middle East that addresses the security needs of Israel and the legitimate political aspirations of the Palestinians.” Persuading

Iran and Syria to abandon their “dangerous behavior” and strengthening the existing alliances with Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries followed.

Weighing in on the Secretary’s overview of the strategy for the region, *Time Magazine’s* Scott MacLeod suggests that “what is as valuable as what she said is what she didn’t say – there was no breast-beating about Iran, Hamas, terrorists, etc.” Her remarks gave the impression of “a stateswoman who will deal with problems seriously, cooperatively and calmly.”

“Gone was the tone of confrontation and ideological rhetoric that characterized the foreign policy of the United States over the last eight years.”

Al-Hayat.

In addition to touching on the future strategy for foreign policy vis-à-vis the Middle East, Secretary Clinton commented on the role of public diplomacy in general and her vision for the Department of State. Clinton emphasized the need to attract “the best and the brightest” as well as the need to “do a better job of giving our talented women and men the resources they need to guarantee that our strategy and out policies can be pursued successfully,” observes the *Mountain Runner* blog on public diplomacy.

Furthermore, when asked about a recent study by the American Academy of Diplomacy that calls for a rapid increase

in resources, training and personnel for the State Department, Secretary Clinton asserted that “obtaining the funds needed to realize this staffing increase” would be one of her highest management goals.

In a series of *confirmation questions* with Senator John Kerry, Secretary Clinton cited three specific initiatives that she would pursue as Secretary of State. “America Houses” in cities across the Arab world, a new “America’s Voice Corps” to rapidly recruit and train fluent speakers of local languages and public diplomacy skills, and the “Global Education Fund” which will offer alternatives to madrassas, were at the top of the list.

In addition to the questioning on US Middle East policy and State Department funding and initiatives, Secretary Clinton discussed more controversial topics including the Broadcasting Board of Governors and the defunct US Information Agency (USIA).

When asked whether the Broadcasting Board of Governors should be replaced or altered, Clinton posited that “a robust and effective BBG” requires a “strong and unambiguous fire wall between the professional journalists and editors at BBG, and others in the US government,” notes *Mountain Runner*. “I recognize this to be a fundamental requirement of effective international broadcasting,” continued Clinton.

Senator John Kerry prefaced another question with the observation that “many are critical of the decision to fold the US Information Agency into the State Department.” He followed by asking Clinton if she was “open to considering some of the bolder proposals to restructure US public diplomacy and outreach.”

While Clinton answered that it was “more practical at this time to improve the functioning of the public diplomacy in the Department than to recreate an independent identity,” Patricia Kushlis of *WhirledView* mused that “her testimony also suggests room for future maneuverability...She’s a savvy lawyer after all.”

Arabs Skeptical about New Administration

In the Arab world, reaction to last week's inauguration of Barack Obama has been mixed. Before the war in Gaza started, a *World Public Opinion* poll in 17 nations, including Egypt and Turkey, showed that optimism in the new administration would improve international relations.

Scott MacLeod of *Time* emphasizes that throughout the inauguration address, Obama spoke directly to the Muslim world about improving relations and that this could possibly change the direction of US-Middle East relations.

Arab media is not so optimistic. Raed Rafei's *Los Angeles Times* blog describes how Arabia media cautioned people not to be too hopeful about Obama and the new administration, and to wait and see how the president will act on his words.

Caryle Murphy writes for the *Huffington Post* that despite President Obama's outreach to the Muslim world during his inaugural address, many Arabs need convincing that he is going to follow through on seeking "a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect." Arabs have been disappointed by American policy in the past and Obama's lack of response during the war in Gaza leading up to inauguration reinforced the skepticism. Murphy goes on to say that Arabs are hopeful that the US will live up to "the universal ideals that it says it stands for" with the new presidency and administration.

Hala Boncompagni reports for *Yahoo* news that Obama has been urged by Palestinian leaders and Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak to make the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the recent Gaza war his top priority. According to Boncompagni, Israel expects policy not to change from their favor and many of the Arab Gulf states are assuming this as well.

In his diary for *BBC News*, Jeremy Bowen writes from Egypt that "If you live in the

Middle East, whatever you think about the United States, you know it is going to have a very big impact on your life." He goes on to say that many Arabs are hopeful and intrigued by the new US president, but Bowen emphasizes that if President Obama wants to achieve what he says, he will have to act on the Gaza war soon.

In an article from *Al-Arabiya's* English publication, Ramzy Baroud writes that although President Obama has made some major efforts, his language has not changed from past administrations. Baroud cites Obama's support of the US commitment to Israel and his use of slogans such as "national security" and "spreading American ideals," which were repeated throughout the Bush administration. He concludes that Palestinians have little hope with the new administration.

In *Foreign Policy*, Marc Lynch advises Obama on how to succeed in improving relations with the Arab world. He argues that the president should follow through with his plan in Iraq, act on Gaza immediately and work with all countries and people in the Middle East.

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The Layalina Review is brought to you thanks to a grant from The Scholl Foundation.

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