

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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War on Al-Manar

Lebanese President Michel Sleiman recently urged the US during talks with Senator John McCain (R-Arizona), the United States to reverse a decision to ban the Al-Manar, the Hezbollah-run television channel, following a bill that was passed last December by the House of Representatives, reports Agence France Presse.

The bill, adopted in a decisive 395-3 vote at the House of Representatives, calls for punitive measures against owners of communications satellites and TV networks seen as spreading “anti-American incitement to violence in the Middle East.”

Arab information ministers are due to meet on January 24 at the Cairo headquarters of the 22-member Arab League to discuss the US bill, according to AFP. In the text accompanying the bill, references are made to Hezbollah’s Al-Manar satellite station Hamas’ Al-Aqsa, as well as Al-Zawraa and Al-Rafidain, two stations that broadcast in Iraq.

Hezbollah is on a list of terrorist organizations that the United States released in December 2004, and its channel Al-Manar has been banned from broadcasting. However, Hezbollah is also a major political party in Lebanon and musters wide public support in the country.

“President Sleiman asked that Washington to backtrack on its decision to ban certain television channels, including Al-Manar,” a statement from his office said after the meeting.

The Lebanese president also voiced concern about a US decision to tighten security measures for airline passengers traveling from Lebanon and 13 other countries, remarks Elias Sakr at The Daily Star. “Lebanon is enjoying an atmosphere of calm and stability and all procedures taken at the airport are excellent and proved their effectiveness,” Sleiman declared.

Sakr reports that McCain said his country had the right to halt the broadcast of foreign stations voicing enmity to the US.

McCain remarked, “I believe some of the stations we prevented were stirring feeling of enmity to America and we have the right to stop them. However, we have to consider the issue further to avoid taking similar decisions regarding stations which did not voice hostility against us.”

In a letter to House of Representatives speaker Nancy Pelosi, Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri criticized Congress for passing a bill that is perceived in the Middle East and elsewhere as infringing upon “the sovereignty of the states broadcasting the penalized satellite content – including Lebanon – and complicates US-Lebanese relations.”

Indeed, many across the region consider that the loose terms employed in the text subject channels and broadcast stations to very arbitrary judgment. Berri added, “This bill represents bypassing to the sovereign national laws of the targeted countries, among them Lebanon which is a free ‘Hyde Park’ for the Lebanese and Arab satellite ‘public opinion’ media channels.”

Reporters Without Borders urged the US authorities to “take care not to lump the fight against unproven anti-Semitism with the fight against terrorism,” according to Counter Punch.

“Putting this TV station in the same category as terrorist groups worries us and does not strike us as the best solution,” the organization continues.

Counter Punch adds that the NGO warned, “We fear that this measure could be just the first of many others, and that all news media that have been accused of helping terrorist organizations in their coverage could end up on this list, in which case there will definitely be abuses.”

The UAE daily Al-Khaleej also criticized the bill to ban Arab satellite channels

on the grounds that they disseminate a hostile and terrorist ideology, according to The National. By undertaking this step, the news site remarks that Congress betrays slogans that proclaim its interest to protect freedom, including freedom of expression, and “demonstrate the extent of Israeli dominion in top decision-making circles in the US.”

The National argues that Arabs should therefore intensify their efforts to counter such moves and put this point high on the agenda of the next meeting of information ministers.

In related news, another channel from Egypt, Al-Faraeen (The Pharaohs),

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which broadcast is considered anti-Semitic and anti-American, recently announced collaboration with a German state-run channel, reports the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI). The Egyptian television channel Al-Faraeen is broadcast by the Atlantic Bird 4A satellite, owned by the France-based Eutelsat Company.

The channel focuses on broad issues with an emphasis on Egyptian national identity. Al-Faraeen has a somewhat secular slant, with a blatant anti-American approach, according to MEMRI. Tawfiq Okasha, the owner of the channel, declared on the channel that the US civilization is “the second in history to be founded on blood.”

In another show, he allegedly called the US “Mama America,” in reference to a well-known anti-American Egyptian theatrical show, and attacked the bill adopted by the US House of Representatives. Okasha says that while the US talks about freedom of speech, “It attempts to restrict TV channels airing views that contradict its own views.”

Okasha concluded that the bill would lead to journalists being sent to Guantanamo, or to the establishment of a new prison for them.

Public Diplomacy or Propaganda?

The current task of the United States Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale, which mainly consists of getting the American message out to the Muslim world, is a difficult one, according to Ed Feulner, president of the Heritage Foundation for The Reporter Online.

“So far, doing that has proved to be even harder than communicating behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War,” comments Feulner.

The difference between now and then, according to Feulner, is that during the Cold War, America was able to deliver news to people who sought accurate information to counter the propaganda thriving in their own country. “But communicating with Muslims requires

our State Department to span a far wider religious gap, Feulner points out.”

“I believe some of the stations we prevented were stirring feelings of enmity toward America and we have the right to stop them.”

John McCain, US Senator.

Winning the war of ideas against a radical Islamist ideology requires an unprecedented use of market research and communications resources. Feulner recommends that the Obama administration establish a public-private communications partnership that “could be tasked with gathering information the government needs to advance the US position in the war of ideas.”

Paramount to the challenge posed by such an endeavor, Feulner remarks that long-term cultural research aimed at understanding foreign audiences, their “national narratives,” their cultures and their public opinions would be necessary for success. Funded by the State Department, the company would “be able to draw in private-sector funding for research,” and the “information would be made available not just to the entire US government, but to private corporations as well.”

Without such a possibility on the horizon, the US has little chance of winning the hearts and minds of the Muslims in Afghanistan, Pakistan and other key strategic areas. “Our ideas and values are powerful, and the tide of history is on our side. It’s time to make sure we’re properly explaining ourselves and winning new allies to our side.” Feulner adds.

On his blog Mountain Runner, Matt Armstrong concurs that winning the hearts and minds is essential to

combat terrorism, as success relies on a psychological struggle for the minds of people. “It is time to stop accepting the propaganda of our enemies. This is about them not us,” he affirms.

While he advocates military and police operations as part of the solution, Armstrong highlights the need to create the incentive among the target population to rebuild their nations and to take it into their own hands, rather than letting Al-Qaeda or another radical organization take the lead.

“We must understand and undermine the real mechanisms that empower the enemy and take ‘aggressive actions to win the important battle of perception,’ as General Stanley McChrystal wrote in his August assessment,” asserts Armstrong. He adds, “Success is not derived on the dollars spent or the contracts let but how whether locals feel self-empowered, hopeful, and secure.”

Armstrong further points out the urgent need for “proactive engagement, follow through, and an invigorated and aggressive public diplomacy to counter the lies and distortions of our enemy.”

Failure to succeed in Afghanistan would be a propaganda victory for the enemy, further aggravating the security risk. “But we cannot succeed if Afghans do not take ownership of their future and reject the Taliban and Al-Qaeda,” Armstrong concludes.

Al-Hurra Disappoints All

The US Congress recently appropriated a further 1.12 million dollars to fund Al-Hurra television in the Middle East, prompting a new round of criticism, reports The National. James Zogby, influential American commentator and founder of the Arab-American Institute, published a particularly disparaging opinion piece in The National, which fueled debate over the efficacy and future of the news outlet.

“Zogby’s words reminded me of the excessive propaganda that preceded the launch of [Al-Hurra] a few years back,” writes Saudi writer and journalist

Muhammad Diyab at Asharq-Alawsat.

Diyab goes on to explain that the heavy “promotional campaigns” surrounding the inauguration of the station gave hope to some Arabs that Al-Hurra might actually deliver on its promise to “change the face of the Arab media in the Middle East, and establish golden rules for media work that others lack.” But, almost six years later, Al-Hurra has “failed to acquire the status of the Al-Jazeera network [or] Al-Arabiya.”

Zogby was also highly skeptical that Al-Hurra enjoys its professed ratings of 9%, suggesting instead that they may be below 2%, continues The National. But one Gulf Daily News reader claims in a letter to the editor that recent audience surveys have suggested Al-Hurra weekly reaches over 27 million viewers, more than other Arabic-language international broadcasters such as BBC Arabic.

“It is time to stop accepting the propaganda of our enemies. This is about them not us.”

*Matt Armstrong,
MountainRunner.*

Deirdre Kline, Director of Communication at Al-Hurra, declares that Zogby “believed six years ago that an American television channel for the Middle East was a bad idea and is intent on proving he’s right.”

Another letter to the Gulf Daily News refutes Kline’s “false” assertion of Al-Hurra viewership, siding instead with Zogby and noting that he has no use for Al-Hurra when he can get “the pro-Israeli spiel from CNN, ABC, CBS, NBC, and FOX among other US ... outlets.”

The outpouring of sentiment in the wake of Zogby’s editorial highlights the continuing controversy and strong feelings over Al-Hurra and American propaganda in the MENA region. “What is needed is for the US to reexamine its anti-Arab politics,” one writer

commented to Gulf Daily News. No amount of television programming is going to change the facts, he continues.

Muhammad Diyab is more measured in his evaluation of Al-Hurra. He is careful to note inconsistent arguments on both sides of the issue, and points out that some Arabs truly did hope Al-Hurra “might broadcast an air of freedom,” as advertised.

“If we look at Al-Hurra TV’s situation today, we will find that it is still miles away from achieving the objectives for which it was originally launched,” Diyab says. “Al-Hurra has disappointed both sides.”

Twittering Their Way to Hearts and Minds

Matt Armstrong recently commented on his blog Mountain Runner on the empowering factor of social media and their ability to advance US interests. “Increased access to information is democratizing,” writes Armstrong. He adds that new media and technology have the capacity to mobilize, increase oversight and accountability, while improving access to resources and markets.

Senator Richard Lugar argued similarly for Foreign Policy that the US Department of State should encourage social networking sites in the struggle for greater rights and freedom. Senator Lugar remarks that during the turmoil that followed Iran’s disputed 2009 presidential election, thousands of opposition supporters and other protesters communicated and organized through Twitter.

Similar success stories were noted across the globe where the US government intervened to facilitate such operations. Senator Lugar considers that these are examples of the “21st-century statecraft,” using the capabilities of modern communications and social networking technologies to win hearts and minds and improve the American image abroad.”

Beyond the mere success that it achieved, modern technology provides the US government with new innovative tools in the country’s

outreach effort, stepping away from the traditional media such as VOA or RFE.

He adds that the adroit use of social networking sites, such as Twitter, Facebook, and others, coupled with text messages and increasingly widespread mobile-phone technology, can help lend support to existing grassroots movements for freedom and civil rights, connect people to information, and help those in closed societies communicate with the outside world, while improving economic conditions.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has encouraged the use of modern technology to support grassroots movements and launched initiatives offering “training and advice to local nongovernmental organizations around the world on how to use the Internet and other digital media to organize, communicate, and be more effective.”

“America needs to beat them at their own game, especially since we invented most of the technology.”

Richard Lugar, US Senator.

Matt Armstrong remarks however that this is a process that started under the previous Under Secretary of State James K. Glassman. The current Under Secretary Judith McHale does not actually oversee US State Department public diplomacy. He adds, “Although she does provide guidance and leadership in areas she has no direct authority over, such as the regional bureaus and the posts. “

If technology offers a new way to communicate America’s message effectively, it is “more often used to enable individuals across a country, or across the globe, to interact, engage, and become empowered,” consequently raising concerns as the content and monitoring of the message.

Senator Lugar believes nonetheless that is a risk worth taking since, “terrorists and other anti-American propagandists have for some time been using the Internet and other techniques to communicate and recruit. America needs to beat them at their own game, especially since we invented most of the technology.”

Such leap forward are illustrated by the fact that Iranians will soon have a new tool at their disposal to broadcast their protests and their government’s repression to the outside world, according to the Policy Director at the National Iranian American Council Jamal Abdi for The Huffington Post.

Until a recent policy shift, it was illegal for American software to go to Iran, “meaning that the Iranian uprising, which itself could be described as an open source movement, has been denied access to some of the most innovative communication and networking software available due to obsolete US policies.”

In mid-December, the Obama Administration, along with Members of Congress, announced that this would change, and as a result, the first iPhone app will soon be introduced providing new ways for Iranians to connect with the world.

President Obama’s approach of “bearing witness” and speaking out in increasingly strong terms on human rights continues to be vindicated. “But even this approach would not be possible if not for Iranians’ access to Twitter, Facebook, and communication software, which the December 15 policy shift and the Iranian Digital Empowerment Act recognize,” notes Abdi.

Reclaiming Islam

The White House has declared that US-born radical cleric Anwar Al-Awlaki, who is suspected of having galvanized support for Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, is of great concern to the United States, according to Zeenews.

“This man is somebody who has sought over the internet to spread that sort of hate and perversion, and obviously to do harm in spreading that hate. Obviously, he is somebody of great concern,” White

House spokesman Robert Gibbs told reporters at his daily news conference.

Al-Awlaki is known to have corresponded with Major Malik Nadal Hasan, who went on a shooting rampage at Fort Hood in Texas last November. The suspected Nigerian plane bomber, Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, also allegedly met Al-Awlaki in Yemen.

“[Al-Awlaki’s] called a lot of attention to himself since he left San Diego,” said local immigration attorney Randall Hamud in an interview with Sign On San Diego. Al-Awlaki’s connection to both incidents is under investigation, but he has denied encouraging Hasan to harm US soldiers.

“When we fight Al-Qaeda, physically and mentally, we are defending the reputation of our religion.”

Tariq Al-Homayed, Asharq-Alawsat Editor-in-Chief.

While the 38-year-old cleric has become more radicalized as his reach increased, it remains unclear to what extent, if any, the “Bin Laden of the internet” is involved with Al-Qaeda or other global terrorism plots. “Is he a cleric or a commander, an inciter or an insider?” ponders Matthew T. Hall at Sign On San Diego.

After leaving the United States in 2002 and moving to Yemen in 2004, Al-Awlaki’s rhetoric became sharper in sermons, blog posts and interviews. His father served as a university president and agriculture minister in Yemen and Al-Awlaki spent much of his youth there.

“The word I had at the time was there was no suggestion of radicalism by him,” said Hamud, who represented several Middle Eastern men arrested as material witnesses in the investigation into the September 11 attacks. “He was always portrayed as a moderate, and he left in high esteem.”

Al-Awlaki is only one of many radical preachers who are a grave source of concern, suspected of recruiting members and inciting support for terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda. More importantly, recent failed terrorist plots have brought forth debates in the Arab world regarding the responsibility of the Muslim community. The Muslim world should hold itself accountable for allowing terrorism to infiltrate the Islamic community, according to Saudi scholar Aaidh Al-Qarni for Asharq-Alawsat.

“What has happened to the nation of Islam? What has happened to the shari’a rules that command amity, fraternity, unity, and peace?” he asks. In the news, Islam is portrayed and associated with images of terrorism and violence, which obstructs the progress of knowledge and development.

Al-Qarni continues, “Whenever we turn on our television sets, we hear news of such disasters in the Muslim countries as are sufficient to dazzle the mind, blind the senses, and kill the soul.” He argues that the poverty, unemployment, years of conflicts and lack of leadership across the Muslim world are largely responsible for fueling radicalism among young men who “grow up full of anger and aggression and ready to brand their opponents as apostates.”

Tariq Al-Homayed, editor-in-chief of Asharq-Alawsat, remarks that the fight against terrorism must be begin first with Arabs and Muslims themselves, struggling to reclaim a religion that has been “hijacked by Al-Qaeda.”

When “we wage war on Al-Qaeda we are protecting ourselves and our reputation and we are protecting our children who extremists are trying to turn into time bombs,” suggests Al-Homayed.

He adds that a serious ideological war is necessary to combat terror while emphasizing the importance of international cooperation through “training, [sharing] information or combating funding [of terrorism] and even cooperation in military operations.”

“When we fight Al-Qaeda, physically and mentally, we are defending the reputation of our religion. It is our battle first and foremost,” he concludes.

Obama's Choice of Words Reveals Flaws in Foreign Policy

In his weekly radio and video address, President Barack Obama discussed the controversy surrounding Umar Farouk 'Abd Al-Mutallab's failed attempt to blow up a Northwest Airlines jet, reports Arab Times Online.

"On [the day of the inauguration] I also made it very clear – our nation is at war against a far-reaching network of violence and hatred, and that we will do whatever it takes to defeat them and defend our country, even as we uphold the values that have always distinguished America among nations," said President Obama.

"The reason the country is uneasy about the Obama administration's response to this attack is a distinct sense of not just incompetence but incomprehension"

Charles Krauthammer, the Washington Post.

The president's reaction stirred strong reactions among analysts. "His remarks ... drew criticism – both for the delay and for using the word 'allegedly' in reference to the attacker's attempt to ignite an explosive device," observes Robert J. Lieber at the Los Angeles Times.

Oliver North expresses his disapproval in The Washington Times over what he believes is a discrepancy in the president's words. Although President

Obama castigated the intelligence community for failing "to connect the dots of intelligence," North believes that Obama is contradicting himself based on what he said concerning the November 30 attack at Fort Hood.

After Maj. Nidal Malik Hassan opened fire at Fort Hood, President Obama cautioned the American people not to jump to conclusions in reference to Hassan's motives. "It is difficult - if not impossible - for any analyst to 'connect the dots' when they are being warned not to 'jump to conclusions,'" asserts North.

"The reason the country is uneasy about the Obama administration's response to this attack is a distinct sense of not just incompetence but incomprehension," writes Charles Krauthammer for The Washington Post. "From the very beginning, President Obama has relentlessly tried to play down and deny the nature of the terrorist threat we continue to face," he continues.

Krauthammer goes on to analyze the linguistic "oddities" of the president's statements. He condemns Obama's reference to 'Abd Al-Mutallab as a "suspect." He believes that Obama should speak of the Nigerian as an "enemy combatant" as opposed to a "defendant." Krauthammer also takes issue with Obama's use of the term "extremist," asserting, "[AbdAl-Mutallab] is a jihadist."

The American media has also used the situation to examine the Obama administration's approach to foreign policy. Critics continue to scrutinize the content of President Obama's statements and their impact on foreign policy and national security.

"If you are trying to keep track of President Obama's euphemisms about the war against Islamic terror, he just added a new one. In his weekly radio address, he replaced 'global war on terror' with 'war on a far-reaching network of violence and hatred,'" writes Monica Crowley for The Washington Times. "Mr. Obama has turned the simple, descriptive acronym 'GWOT' into the mangled 'WFRNVH,'" she continues.

Oliver North also discusses the same statement, which identifies Al-Qaeda as the "far reaching network of violence and hatred." "The assessment is...far too

narrow and ignores who 'our adversary' really is," he notes. North believes that the statement implies that all radical Islamists who pose a danger to national security are under the Al-Qaeda network, which he stresses is not the case.

At the Wall Street Journal, Eliot A. Cohen views Obama's choice of words as a large flaw in his foreign policy. "Neither Mr. Obama nor the predecessor he still complains of have been able to get beyond the trope of 'extremists who have perverted a great religion,'" he observes.

Cohen criticizes the president's attempts to placate both allies and adversaries. "Mr. Obama has not articulated an effective policy of dealing with enemies who are neither criminals nor soldiers. Instead, he has tried to walk down both sides of a street at once," he states.

Both Charles Krauthammer and Monica Crowley are in agreement that the president has failed to effectively articulate important aspects of its foreign policy. "A government that refuses to admit we are at war, indeed, refuses even to name the enemy...turns laxity into a governing philosophy," notes Krauthammer.

Crowley stresses the importance of clearly defining the adversary in the war on terror. "Unless and until we see the threat clearly, call the enemy what it is, and identify what motivates it, and assign blame to its proper place, we will not gain the edge we need to defeat it," she concludes.

Muslims in the Media

Misrepresentation of Muslims and Islam as being intrinsically linked with terrorism by American media and news outlets "plays a significant role in manufacturing Islamophobia within western societies," blogs Ismail Farooki on Morocco Post.

"Because Muslims seldom appear in news reports or other media sources except as perpetrators of violence, supposedly in the name of Islam, many Westerners understandably conclude that all Muslim's [sic] act from inherently religious motivations and that Islam is dangerous," writes Farooki.

“Mainstream American media coverage of terrorism, Yemen and related issues is, with very few exceptions in terms of quality analysis and reporting, a horror show of superficiality, selectivity and racist sensationalism,” writes Rami G. Khouri for The Daily Star.

In his blog on Morocco Post, Farooki asserts that the media “presents us with distorted images of Islam and that in turn conjures stereotypes and prejudice.”

“In every report I have seen, without fail, the thrust of the report is that terrorism is a consequence of Muslim religious extremism that is somehow connected with a visceral hatred of the United States or Western ways in general,” writes Khouri for The Daily Star.

In sharp contrast, most terrorists “explain that they carry out their deed in response to the deeds of others – such as Israel’s assault on Palestinians, US and British armies in Iraq or Afghanistan, American drone attacks against Yemeni militants, or some other such issue.” claims Khouri.

He backs up his claim by citing a study conducted by Robert Pape at the University of Chicago, where Pape’s analysis “of over 500 “suicide” or “martyrdom” attacks around the world since 1980 allowed him to observe that “what over 95 percent of all suicide terrorist attacks, around the world since 1980, have in common – from Lebanon, to Chechnya, to Sri Lanka, to Kashmir, to the West Bank – is not religion, but a specific strategic goal: to compel a modern democracy to withdraw combat forces from territory the terrorists view is their homeland, or prize greatly.”

Farooki also points out that while crimes committed by Westerners are never linked with their religion, “The media is always quick to stereotype Muslims as terrorists by linking the news to religion when Muslims have done something wrong.”

On the same note, he writes “media outlets consistently overlook the voices of moderation that come from the majority of Muslims” by pointing out that “very few of America’s frontline newspapers reported the condemnation of the violence issued immediately by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)” during the Danish cartoon controversy in 2006.

Sheila Musaji writes in The American Muslim, “Over the past several years there has been a great deal of discussion within the Muslim community on the subject of how best to deal with extremism within the Muslim community, and recently there have been some very encouraging developments which encourage practical steps to counter radicalization.”

The Muslim world is increasingly realizing the critical role played by not only Western media, but also local media in the Middle East in determining how the world views the relationship between terrorism and the Muslim world.

Musaji continues, “The American Muslim and Arab communities are attempting to (do) whatever they can to make it clear that we reject violence and extremism as solutions to anything. I hope that there will be many more such efforts, just as there have previously been many other efforts.”

“Mainstream American media coverage of terrorism... [is] a horror show of superficiality, selectivity and racist sensationalism.”

Rami Khouri, Daily Star.

Saqr Gobash Saeed Gobash, Abu Dhabi’s Minister of Labour and Chairman of National Media Council said at a roundtable discussion on the Arab Media’s role in combating terrorism at the Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research (ECSSR), “Terrorism-related discussions and the role of the media in fighting or promoting terrorism focused on one theme — that the Arab region is a source of terrorism in the world. However, an objective observer will find the region is a main victim of terror,”

reports Samir Salama for Gulf News.

Speaking at the same event, Yasir Abdul Monem Abdul Azeem, director of the technical secretariat of the Arab Information Ministers Council, “called on media in the Arab world to fight terrorism from the roots through in-depth, thematic and analytical coverage and not just news which may not hit the point.”

He further states that while all Arab countries mostly condemned all forms of terrorism, “voices communicated through the mass media failed to differentiate between Arabs and Muslims, on one hand, and terrorists, on the other.”

Abdul Azeem further asserts that the international community concurred on the destructive aspect of terrorism, “but they differ on what terrorism is because of the lack of a clear definition. There should be a clear differentiation between terrorism which must be fought by all means and struggle of people for freedom and independence,” highlights Salama.

The Current State of Arab Media and Censorship

There is a general consensus among media watchdog organizations and committees that 2009 has been a dramatic year in the journalism world, remarks Genevieve Long, a contributing editor at The Epoch Times.

The total number of journalists killed reached a staggering total of 76, up 26% from the previous year. Overall statistics from Reporters Without Borders revealed that 33 journalists were kidnapped, over 573 reporters and 151 bloggers were arrested, while 1,456 journalists and 61 bloggers were physically assaulted.

The Middle East remains the most repressive region in the world, according to Freedom House, an organization which advocates for freedom, democracy and human rights, reports The Botswana Gazette.

Following an annual survey of political rights and civil liberties, countries were assigned a freedom status of “Free,”

Partly Free, or Not Free,” depending on key indicators and developments in 2009. The report shows that press freedom declined in Morocco and Palestine, while countries like Bahrain, Jordan and Yemen were downgraded from “Partly Free” to “Not Free.”

In Yemen, internet freedom went downhill as authorities continued to block news sites accused of stirring the public and advocating violence and terrorism.

The only national internet portal has significantly increased hosting prices and imposed stringent conditions on site owners, reports Zawaya. Citizens, bloggers and journalists launched a national protest against poor internet services, demanding that the government refrains from blocking websites and reduce the service prices.

As a result, the Yemeni government led a campaign to block more news sites and applied punitive laws and prison sentences for anyone “trying to extract or publish prohibited content.”

The campaign led to the arrest of several journalists and editors, and forced Yemeni bloggers to use aliases for fear of prosecution or abduction. In September 2009, an e-journalist was kidnapped for publishing articles critical of the government’s performance in security issues.

On the other hand, the Egyptian regime is considered the most repressive to internet users in the Arab world, according to a report by the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI). Kareem Ezzat, a Middle East political analyst from Global Voices, notes that while Egyptian authorities have stopped blocking websites, it has directed its repression towards bloggers and internet users. He comments that the level of repression and harassment against internet users has increased with the increase in the number of users over the past three years.

According to Reporters Without Borders, Egypt was ranked 143 out of 175 countries. Independent journalists and opposition bloggers who spoke out against the ruling party were subjected to lawsuits, sentenced to prison, beaten, harassed or exiled, according to The Washington Post.

Although Egypt has improved 13

places compared its 2008 ranking, notes Mohamed Abdel Salam from Bikya Masr, the country’s position is remains low compared to ten other Arab countries such as Kuwait, Lebanon, UAE, Qatar, Mauritania, Oman, Jordan, Bahrain, Morocco and Algeria.

Attention has also been refocused to the state of media and freedom of expression in Iran. According to Reporters Without Borders, Iran has maintained its status as “the world’s biggest prison for the media,” with more than 42 journalists and cyber-dissidents apprehended so far, ranking the country 172 out of 176 countries in terms of press freedom.

On January 4, the government confirmed a six year sentence, five years of exile, and a lifetime ban on political activity for Ahmed Zeydabadi, a reporter who was charged with sedition and propaganda against Iran’s regime in August.

On the same day, Bahaman Ahamadi Amoe was sentenced to 34 lashes and seven years and four months in jail. Some parliamentarians also requested that detained government opponents be executed within five days of their arrest, thus reducing their chance to appeal from 25 days to five.

“We are very disturbed by the calls repeatedly made by the most senior officials for Iran to impose the ‘supreme punishment’ on detainees, including journalists,” says Reporters Without Borders. The organization adds, “There is an urgent need for international bodies to take action before a tragedy takes place, before political prisoners begin being executed.”

Similarly, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) has condemned Iran’s continued assault on the press, reports Washington TV, an internet-based television channel broadcasting to Iran. The Committee’s deputy director, Robert Mahoney, declared the committee’s “call on the Iranian authorities to put an end to threats and attacks against journalists and free those who remain behind bars.”

The Iranian intelligence ministry also released a list of 60 NGOs and news media groups believed to have encouraged and facilitated rioting as part of the Western governments’ ‘soft war’ against the Islamic regime.

The ministry warned Iranians against any illegal contact with these blacklisted organizations which include the BBC, the Human Rights Watch, and the Voice of America, reports Kim Andrew Elliott, citing the Agence France-Presse (AFP).

Despite attempts by Arab regimes at “censoring and cracking down on traditional mass media” the ANHRI’s latest report emphasizes that using the Internet in the Arab world created a “snowball effect,” which is getting bigger and stronger in the region.

While countries like Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Syria continue to block websites, ANHRI maintains that “this new force cannot be stopped by government’s actions of censorship, blocking the internet, and arresting and even torturing internet users.”

New Security Measures Spark Fears of Abuse

There is deep concern among Saudi students who study in the United States, that the introduction of the enhanced security search measures will affect their return into the country, reports Asharq-Alwasat. Following a terrorist attempt over the holidays, federal officials imposed new security measures on passengers coming from fourteen countries, who will be subjected indefinitely to the intense screening at airports worldwide.

Many Saudi students fear a return to the measures that were taken in the wake of 9/11; a fear that was reinforced by the sequestration for two days of a Saudi student at Amsterdam airport in the Netherlands.

Ahmad Al-Kaabi, a Saudi student in Texas, pointed out that the particular treatment of Saudi nationals at checkpoints on their way to the United States is not the result of this incident; in fact, it has been in force for years.

Shadi Hamid, a Middle East and security-policy expert at Brookings Institution’s Doha Center, explains in an interview for Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty that the new restrictions may affect Washington’s

relationship with Middle Eastern nations. The restrictions entail being patted down and that all the selected passengers' carry-ons will be hand searched.

He believes that these new security measures may not necessarily enhance America's security but may reassure Americans, and is after all a symptom "of a general hysteria that we have seen in the media the last week in response to the Christmas bomber plot."

Hamid remarks that these measures may be in fact limited since terrorists may very well adapt their strategies. He further points out that there is certainly a risk of some fallout with the countries listed, which should be kept in mind in public diplomacy efforts.

"Clearly it's not going to help trade or business relations between US and Saudi Arabia," Saudi Businessman Ahmed Egal told The Media Line, reports the Jerusalem Post. "It will not be easy for Saudi businessmen to travel."

"Many Saudi businessmen were extremely frustrated by the delays and were sometimes denied visas to go to the United States," Egal said. "As a consequence they directed their sourcing to other countries in Europe and Asia."

Economic analysts are questioning the inclusion of Saudi Arabia, as it is one of the few countries on the list with which the US maintains close political and economic ties.

Mshari Al-Zaidy denounces in Asharq-Alwasat the Western panic with regards to Islamist terrorists, which seems to stem from a security "hysteria rather than a mature conduct." According to Al-Zaidy, Westerners fear that Islamists will sneak up on them from every angle or will fall out of the sky.

"Will every Muslim now automatically fall under suspicion?" he asks. He adds that terrorists are not easy to track down and do not always correspond to specific profiles. "There are no scanners for the brain or the soul that could expose the evil thoughts nesting in the heads of terrorists. If there were such a thing, most of us would not be able to even sit down with one another!"

The US's reaction is "nothing but a knee-

jerk reaction." The Obama administration has changed its tone and Al-Zaidy believes it is now starting to sound more like the former administration, as the president "vows to hunt down terrorists and tighten security measures at airports by using full-body scanners."

"Will every Muslim now automatically fall under suspicion?"

Mshari Al-Zaidy, Asharq-Alwasat

Al-Zaidy believes these measures fail to address the real issue, that is religious fanaticism, and as long as it remains adequately unaddressed, no airport security measures will be able to ensure complete safety.

Failure to Communicate

US reliance on Jordanian intelligence, a decades-old partnership forged in part by both countries' aversion to Islamic radicalism has proved useful in the past but is now being questioned after an obvious failure to communicate that led to a Jordanian "triple agent" who blew himself up at a CIA outpost in Afghanistan last week, reports The National. The news site remarks that this is a sign of clouded relations that have now become obvious.

This revelation may prove uncomfortable for the Hashemite kingdom as it is currently facing a foundering economy and pressure for delaying domestic political reforms.

"The overwhelming majority of Jordanian public opinion, and indeed Arab public opinion, disagrees with US policy in the region, and the revelation of this incident highlights the strong co-ordination between the government of Jordan and the US, particularly with

CIA operatives in Afghanistan," explains Fares Braizat, a Jordan expert and head of research at Qatar University's Social and Economic Survey Research Institute.

Homam Khaleel Mohammad Abu Mallal was reportedly recruited by Jordanian intelligence to infiltrate Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and acquire information vital to America's war effort there. Instead, the 33-year-old Jordanian physician turned on them, detonating a bomb at the behest of Al-Qaeda that killed seven CIA officers and his Jordanian handler, according to the news site.

Although believed to be operating there, Jordan has never officially confirmed its presence in Afghanistan.

Ellen Laipson, president of the Stimson Center, a Washington-based think tank, speculates that the revelation that the Jordanian General Intelligence Department (GID) was operating beside American forces in Afghanistan "has probably created some friction or discomfort in Jordan." An issue that King Abdullah of Jordan will have to deal with now.

Even though Jordan has always been an ally of the US in combating terrorism, the disclosure has also led to criticism of the Jordanian government for taking part in far-flung conflicts, said Mohammed Al-Masri, head of public opinion polling at the University of Jordan's Center for Strategic Studies.

"Many in the elite are asking, 'Are they really furthering Jordanian security, or just providing services for America?'" he remarks. The National adds that paramount among the public is concern that political reform at home has been sacrificed for the pay-off of unbending support for America.

Mustafa Hamarneh a political analyst who now runs a community centre in a village just outside Amman, points out, "What we hear from people in Washington and from Americans visiting the region is, 'Don't expect pressure from Washington.'"

In the meantime, international human rights organizations have expressed concern about rampant abuses, including arbitrary detentions, torture in prison and, more recently, deaths from alleged police beatings in Jordan.

Some fear this pressure, combined with Jordan's enfeebled moderate Islamist opposition, could further choke off venues for peaceful discourse and, in turn, possibly lend itself to more radical actions.

Reuel Marc Gerecht, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, comments for *The Wall Street Journal* that if anything, this also demonstrates that jihadists are now displaying an impressive counterintelligence ability, underestimated by the CIA. He remarks that Hashemite monarchy imprisons lots of Islamic militants, and the GID has the responsibility to interrogate them.

The dead Jordanian official, Sharif Ali bin Zeid, reportedly a member of the royal family, may not have been a down-and-dirty case officer with considerable hands-on contact with militants, but Al-Balawi surely passed through some kind of intensive screening process with the GID.

"Yet the GID and the CIA got played, and Al-Qaeda has revealed that it is capable of running sophisticated clandestine operations with sustained deception," notes Gerecht. He concludes that the Fort Hood incident, the failed Christmas terrorist attempt and the double-agent suicide bombing in Khost "ought to tell us that America's war with Islamic militancy is far—far—from being over."

According to Doyle MacMannus for the *LA Times*, these past jihadist incidents rather illustrate a failure to communicate among the various intelligence agencies. He argues, "It probably won't be clear for a while exactly what lapses in the system allowed Abdulmutallab to board a Detroit-bound plane wearing underwear packed with explosives -- whether the fault lies with the CIA, the separate National Counterterrorism Center or some combination of agencies."

The problem resides in what he coins the "institutional culture." The CIA exists mainly to collect secret information; the FBI, to catch and prosecute criminals; the State Department, to promote US interests overseas. "Their missions are different, so their cultures are different; some friction is unavoidable."

MacMannus concludes that by shining light on organizational dysfunction that is hard to dramatize, the attempted bombing has highlighted a problem that

desperately needs to be solved. "It might even generate the political will to come up with a fix -- and, this time, to make it stick."

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