

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



Layalina Productions Inc., 1250 24th Street NW, Suite 300 Washington, DC 20037

Vol.VI No. 12 June 4-June 17, 2010

Israel's Hasbara Suffers Setbacks

Hirsh Goodman for Right Side of the News blames Israel's delay in revealing "the nature and affiliations of the organizations [...] on board" of the Mavi Marmara, dubbed the Freedom Flotilla by Arabs, for the negative international perceptions that followed the raid. The author explains that Israel is now faced with a major public diplomacy blunder that will hinder the Jewish state's relations with the US, the Arab world and Europe.

Goodman blames the situation on the failure of the Israeli government to address the issue in a timely manner, and scarce attention granted to its public diplomacy in general. The lack of cooperation and the non-alignment of priorities between the intelligence and the Hasbara community has forced Israel to face "economic, artistic, and academic embargoes, continuous attacks in the UN, and other world forums."

But Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon argues in The Jerusalem Post that Israel's foreign ministry and other governmental agencies have led a robust public diplomacy campaign "to prepare for the worst, while hoping for the best. In fact the level of coordination before, during and after these events was unprecedented."

Responding to criticism for the delay in releasing IDF footage of naval commandos being attacked aboard the Mavi Marmara, Ayalon noted, "To be able to disseminate pictures from the operation to apprehend the ships, the IDF had to ensure that no soldier's faces could be identified and that no operational procedures were broadcast to our enemies... Our first priority is to the safety of our citizens, especially when they are on the front lines defending us in increasingly difficult situations."

Ayalon added that Israel's public

diplomacy has become the country's new battlefield and is now starting to reap success, noting a positive change of attitude towards Israel by some media outlets that had previously adopted a critical stance.

Israel's Foreign Minister Agvidor Lieberman also responded to attacks on his country's public diplomacy efforts regarding the Flotilla in Ynet, waxing that the world holds a biased attitude against the Jewish State and that no amount of public diplomacy will be able to change this trend. He added that words are not enough, "we need to make Hasbara a budgetary priority."

Citing the disproportionately small budget with which Israel conducts its PR campaigns in Europe compared with those of Arab countries "that face no budgetary constraints and no moral, bureaucratic, or legal limitations," Lieberman claims that Israel is unequivocally at a disadvantage. Likening Israel and Arab countries to David and Goliath respectively, the foreign minister further laments, "to this we should add the brainwashing by the Arab media enlisted to the Arab cause; high-powered and high-budget media, which include the likes of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya."

But on a resigned note, Liebermann concludes that justice is on the side of Israel, and consequently, "we would do well to be able to tell the world about it."

Yossi Klein Hallelvi, a fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem, cites for The Wall Street Journal a liberal columnist in the daily Ma'ariv "It's not enough to be right, one also needs to be smart." Hallelvi argues that the "demonization" of Israel has generated a crisis of confidence, putting its citizens in an uncomfortable situation.

He adds, "The growing estrangement between Israel and world opinion is a tragic negation of the Zionist vision." And while Israel's international status

has always suffered from international "racism," Hallelvi points out that today, "however misguided, the moral outrage against Israel is real."

Upholding the UN commissions and courts as "anti-Israel kangaroo courts," Hallelvi notes that, to the bewilderment of the Jewish state and its supporters, other rogue states such as Iran seem to be able to get away with whatever threat they may pose.

Robert Fisk, long term veteran journalist for The Independent argues that Israel launched a propaganda war, hoping that the media will do its job, transforming "the protesters" into "armed peace activists",

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vicious anti-Semites ‘professing pacifism, seething with hate, pounding away at another human being with a metal pole.’”

Fisk decries the tactic employed by Israel claiming that they are affecting media coverage aligned with Israel’s objective, that is, to vilify the people on board of the flotilla regardless of who they were or what happened.

“We need to make Hasbara a budgetary priority.”

Avigdor Lieberman, Israeli Foreign Minister

However, according to The Economist, Israel’s mishandling of the flotilla and the subsequent PR campaign, which conveys the idea to the world that Israel resorts to violence too readily and has only further isolated the country, may stem from Israel’s general impression of being besieged. The news site argues that the Israel’s aggressive rhetoric and attitude results from its growing isolation, further weakening its standing in the world.

“The deterioration of Israel’s relations with Turkey, whose citizens were among the nine dead, is depriving Israel of a rare Muslim ally and mediator,” comments the news site. Furthermore, the disquieting growing estrangement of America towards Israel deprives the country of another steadfast ally. Spinning into a “vicious circle,” Israel’s besieged mentality fuels its aggressive attitude which, in turn, incites anti-Israel resentment.

The Economist points out that Arab countries must do more to quell the violence promoted by Islamic and insurgent groups such as Hamas. Israel, the only democracy in the region, “a regional hub of science, business and culture,” suffers from the growing isolation and consequently so do its citizens.

While the world seems to be in dismay that Israel and its citizens defend the actions of the IDF on the Flotilla, The Telegraph

explains that given the existential threat the country faces, most particularly from Iran and its nuclear program, this attitude is understandable. The news site defends Israel’s stepped-up propaganda efforts to offset its opponents’ campaigns such as the ones led by Iran, Hezbollah or Hamas, who have become experts in the matter.

“Israel has to learn, and learn quickly, to make the same impact politically and diplomatically as it has traditionally made militarily,” continues the news site, before stressing that it also needs to develop a more subtle approach to its foes.

The Times Online concurs that Iran’s propaganda has been successful in changing the world’s perception of Israel. Portrayed as a waning power, restricted to a small enclave, no longer benefiting from the unconditional support of the United States, Israel is depicted as “facing the might of a resurgent Muslim world under Tehran’s leadership.” Times Online comments that such arguments have been steadily disseminated over the Arab world through Arabic language news channels, such as Al-Alam.

To underline this new image of Israel, the Tehran propaganda machine has replaced footage of poor Palestinians crushed by “Zionists” with that of the growing arsenal of rockets that Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza have built up for what President Ahmadinejad calls “the final assault on the Zionist state”. Israel, which was previously depicted as aggressive and domineering, is now depicted as cowardly. The mullahs in Friday sermons in Iran now claim such things as “the Jew runs away at the first sight of blood”.

The Times adds that Tehran’s tactic has managed to turn one of Israel’s former ally into an enemy, namely Turkey. Believing that its potential adversaries are weak and indecisive, the Khomeinist regime appears determined to push the region to the edge of war and, perhaps, beyond.

Global Citizens, We Value Your Opinion

Israeli Foreign Ministry Spokesman Yigal Palmor held a live internet video conference with members of the Facebook

group “Gaza Flotilla – the world should know the truth,” to disseminate Israel’s point of view on the Gaza-bound Flotilla raid, reports Gil Ronen for Arutz Sheva.

Approximately 115,000 members of the pro-Israel group have attempted to convey Israeli’s stance on the issue in an effort to “support, encourage and supply accurate information” to pro-Israel activists and the rest of the world on the social networking site. Palmor was also due to comment on Israel’s public diplomacy situation.

The Facebook group’s members participated in the conference by asking questions and providing their opinions on the flotilla clash.

The conference illustrates how governments are resorting to the internet for diplomatic purposes. In America, the officials working under the Obama administration tout the internet and social networks as powerful tools to underpin the administration’s public diplomacy efforts. “[Social networks are] an incredible resource that needs to be harnessed,” said Jared Cohen during a lecture sponsored by Ogilvy Public Relations, reports the Associated Press.

Cohen, a member of Secretary of State Clinton’s policy planning staff, described how he saw the power of social media in affecting Iran. While visiting an Iranian marketplace, Cohen witnessed exchange of information among the youth through mobile devices. According to the Associated Press, Cohen advised that “diplomats with decades of experience and knowledge need to work with the under-30 age group that is deftly using Internet-based communication technology.”

Vinton Cerf, vice president for Google, commented that the Obama administration is “the first administration I can think of that has engaged this deeply the use of technology in the State Department.”

Among other initiatives, the State Department launched the Virtual Student Foreign Service program and a new social website called “Opinion Space.” Despite the government’s use of the internet as a diplomacy tool, Helle Dale at the Heritage Foundation’s blog The Foundry, believes that the latest venture is a waste of valuable resources.

“The Internet is a great public diplomacy tool, but only when used as part of a strategy support [sic] US policy goals such as democracy, freedom and human rights,” Dale maintains.

Opinion Space, which places participants on a “global opinion map,” has about 4,000 users globally, according to the State Department’s New Media Director, Katie Dowd.

Dale questions the effectiveness and use of the website, arguing that it is unclear whether the information gathered on the site will be used to inform public diplomacy techniques. Helle Dale concludes that “devoting US resources and ingenuity to helping its citizens should be the focus of our public diplomacy, not gimmicky new State Department websites.”

Alan W. Silberberg for The Huffington Post discusses the digital divide that is growing, excluding an increasing number of people.

“The Digital Divide is actually becoming more serious,” he writes. Although the internet is growing and evolving at a rapid pace, people without the basics do not reap the benefits of technology. Silberberg states that the basics are: a cellular or wireless phone, easy internet access and a working computer.

Among other recommendations, Silberberg advises, “No Government 2.0 program should be funded without addressing the digital divide access issues, or at least examining alternative information distribution methods.” He also maintains that industrialized nations should recycle electronics and other devices to provide access to low income and rural households.

For O’Reilly Radar, Alex Howard shadowed Alec J. Ross, the US Secretary of State’s Senior Advisor for Innovation. According to Howard, Ross addresses “some of the State Department’s greatest challenges, including Internet freedom, human trafficking and civic empowerment abroad.”

Ross believes that technology has the capacity to change the world. “One of the things about technology is that it takes a top-down world and changes it,” he stated. “The traditional command and

control structure of the 20th Century has a much more tenuous hold on society.”

Alec J. Ross highlighted the importance of initiative and tools in successful public diplomacy campaigns. “A lot of Gov 2.0 tools are great for transparency that allow citizens to become better informed and take actions in their own interest,” he stated.

“[Social networks are] an incredible resource that needs to be harnessed.”

Jared Cohen, member of the Secretary of State’s Policy Planning Staff

“These same kinds of tools can be used to empower citizens who have historically been intimidated by cartels, or who are left powerless in the face of bad actors. That can become expressed through the collective pressure that comes through the power of these tools and the ability to name names.”

BBG Out of Touch with Reality

A recently published report by the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee entitled “US International Broadcasting: Is Anybody Listening?” broached the challenges that the Broadcasting Board of Governors currently faces, reports Matt Armstrong on his blog Mountain Runner.

The report’s findings highlight the BBG’s “staffing difficultie,” noting “an average acancy on the board of over 470 days.” For example, the Board has been without a chairman since 2008. Armstrong further criticizes the staffing issue, noting that while the list of new members for the Board was submitted in November 2009, “the new slate of members of the BBG

has yet to be confirmed by the Senate.”

Additionally, the report notes that the BBG is competing fiercely with China and Russia to engage listeners and viewers. Armstrong adds that the report also recommends changes to the Smith-Mundt Act, describing the firewall as “anachronistic and potentially harmful.” The reports points out some incoherent issues. The Smith-Mundt Act prevents Arabic speaking immigrants from viewing Al-Hurra, yet they have access to Al-Jazeera. This, coupled with the rise of the internet, which enables computer users in the US to receive video and audio streams of BBG broadcasts, betray the obsolete legislation of Smith-Mundt Act.

China is increasingly operating from the US to block American activities in China through the internet and the press. The report notes, “While Chinese state media Xinghua has more than 70 in the US; Xinhua has 3 bureaus in the US, while China has blocked Voice Of America’s (VOA) attempt to open a second bureau in China.”

Likewise, Russia ceased virtually all American broadcasting in Russia. In the meantime, Al-Hurra’s disproportionate budget (the \$90 million budget is greater than the combined costs of Radio Free Asia, Radio/TV Marti and VOA’s Persian News Network) allows the channel to enjoy a marginal viewership.

Senator Richard Lugar (R- IN) commented on the pivotal importance of international broadcasting in American public diplomacy, noting the key role that the BBG plays in its development, according to Big News. However, Lugar criticizes the fact that political obstruction and “bickering” has stood in the way of having a full and efficient board, which in turn has affected “our nation’s foreign policy.”

In the meantime, VOA’s Persian News Network and Radio Free Europe’s Persian-language Radio Farda provides much needed news and information yet remains largely underfunded, according to the report. The document further stresses that the BBG should aim for a broader outreach through programming, and not limiting itself to US-friendly audiences.

In related stories, a civic group is to soon disclose evidence that the American government paid tens of thousands of dollars to journalists in Miami to run negative coverage against Cuba and five alleged Cuban intelligence agents, reports Cuba's Ahora.

The litigation, filed by the Partnership for Civil Justice Fund, asserts that the Broadcasting Board of Governors and its Office of Cuba Broadcasting are withholding information that will show they have engaged in activities violating federal laws, specifically the Smith-Mundt Act, which prohibits the BBG from seeking to propagandize the US public, and may be continuing to do so.

Linn Washington for Counterpunch explains that according to some, it was mere surmise that the same journalists who were paid \$1,125 to \$58,600 "to appear on anti-Castro programs produced by the US Office of Cuba Broadcasting before and during the trial for the Cuban Five also published scandalous articles about the Five in an influential Spanish language newspaper owned by the Miami Herald and in other local media."

Several human rights organizations also declared the trial to be unfair.

US Pavilion: A Corporate Blunder

Since its opening on May 1st, criticism of the United States' Pavilion at the World Expo in Shanghai has continued, remarks Jian Wang for the USC Center on Public Diplomacy. The only positive aspects of the Pavilion were the taped greetings by prominent Americans like Barack Obama, Hilary Clinton and Kobe Bryant, as well as the 160 American student ambassadors present. Wang notes that Chinese viewers seemed to enjoy how personable and engaging American leaders appeared, in contrast with the often removed and distant Chinese heads of government.

Wang praises the significant contribution of American students, noting, "More than any other country at the Expo, America is better represented through the physical presence of these young people," all of whom speak some Chinese, interact daily with visitors and represent America's

foreign policy future.

While Cynthia Schneider, also for the USC Center on Public Diplomacy, acknowledges that the US is fortunate to participate in the international Expo given the previous administration's disinterest, there are very few positive points to bring up.

The Secretary of State and the monetary contributions of Chinese people both merit acknowledgement, yet the lackluster, unimpressable Pavilion presented by the United States remains very concerning.

In describing the presentations of other countries, Schneider writes, "Almost without exception the pavilions dazzle with innovative architecture, and with unusual shapes, colors and lighting." Japan showcases its highly regarded green technology initiatives, Indonesia highlights its cultural diversity and the United Arab Emirates used the opportunity to demonstrate the country's focus on sustainability. The US Pavilion, in comparison, seems to have been built "with all the design brilliance of a suburban shopping mall."

Schneider also deplores the murky affairs involving Nick Winslow, a special effects professional and theme park advisor and Ellen Eliasoph, a partner in the Beijing branch of a leading American law firm, two private citizens with "little relevant background or expertise [who] were given free rein to determine the design and content of the Pavilion." As she denigrates the State Department's choice to relegate the financial responsibility to the private sector, she highlights the issues of cronyism and no-bid contracts that have characterized the Shanghai venture.

This comparatively poor representation leads Schneider to conclude that the US State Department does not take cultural diplomacy, or other "soft power" initiatives, seriously. While she admits that the current economic downturn would have made such a public expenditure difficult to justify, she questions why the State Department did not opt for the "tried and true approach to corporate sponsorship that museums and performing arts companies have used for years, namely that the fundraisers fundraise, the corporate sponsors

sponsor, and the experts execute?"

She further remarks that the Pavilion is America's most obvious outreach attempt to the world and consequently notes that even though the private sector took over this endeavor, it did not justify the poor performance and outcome. Citing the examples of Northrop Grumman and Boeing, Schneider notes that the corporate giants also do invest and compete for "smart power" projects in areas from aid to "strategic communication."

Though in such a media-driven age Schneider recognizes that the World Expo "might seem a quaint throwback to a bygone era", its popularity within China, coupled with the far greater energy and resources invested by other countries, ought to reveal such events' significance. Given the bevy of creative producers (architects, filmmakers, writers, artists, actors, etc.) that the US exports each year, she continues, creating an effective and informative Pavilion showcasing America's uniqueness and freedom of expression ought to have been simple.

When addressing the prevalent presence of corporate logos at the US Pavilion, Wang notes that "Chinese people are probably more trusting of the brands from these companies than the policies of the American government."

However, as American blogger and "citizen diplomat-at-large" Candace Ren Burnham writes, "Just because I love Vietnamese iced coffee does not mean that I'm going to connect with other aspects of the culture." Whether its brands or cuisine, such national objects can only go so far. As Burnham and Schneider both argue, better programs and educational presentations, a general commitment to cultural diplomacy, is imperative for deepened cross-cultural understanding. The World Expo was an opportunity, now missed, for the US government and the Department of State to represent itself and its country on its own terms.

An Unhappy

Anniversary

Following his landmark speech in Cairo, US President Barack Obama has played an active role in engaging with Muslim communities worldwide, according to Stephen Kaufman at the United States Mission to the UN. Obama's vision has yielded new partnerships among business and grassroots political communities, the Entrepreneurship Summit that took place in Washington DC in late May being the most recent one.

Kaufman denies accusations that the administration has not done enough, praising the president for following up on his promise to promote "common interests and shared values." As he states, "Obama told the attendees that both peoples are bound by the common aspirations of wanting to live a dignified life in peace and security.."

Among other notable efforts, Kaufman remarks that the Obama administration named science envoys to majority-Muslim countries and planned to launch centers of scientific excellence around the world. While America's withdrawal from Iraq remains ongoing, the Obama administrations has denounced torture and dropped "war on terror" rhetoric. Additionally, the administration made strategic use of social media to build networks based on common interests- especially among the Muslim world's massive, discontented youth population.

While his speech was heralded by many as a watershed moment in US outreach to the Muslim world, critics believe that the administration has actually failed to follow up on its promises. Mark Lynch argues for Foreign Policy Magazine that Obama's successes may have been compromised over America's "seeming support" of Israel's recent flotilla.

White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs declared in a statement that he doubted that America's position on the event would have any impact on Muslims across the world. But Lynch disagrees, stating that Obama's position represents another failure to follow up on his pledges in Cairo, which will most likely fuel further resentment in the Arab world. The US government's reactions to the flotilla events are perceived as

a continuation of its position on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the latter having been used as a benchmark of American engagement with Arabs and Muslims by the Middle East.

Lynch remarks, "The initial US response [...] has sparked a torrent of outrage," adding that Obama needs to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and act on putting an end to the Gaza blockade. A failure to do so, argues Lynch, will make the Cairo speech's first anniversary, "its epitaph."

Octavia Nasr of CNN concurs with Lynch and explains that enthusiasm for Obama in the Muslim world has turned to skepticism overnight, following widespread frustration regarding America's reaction to the flotilla. She remarks that among the telling signs of this frustration and skepticism is the fact that most of the media in the Arab world has not covered the approaching anniversary of his speech.

While residents of the Arab world are looking to the White House in hopes of a stand mirroring President Obama's promises in Cairo, it generally appears to them that "the White House is trying to understand the circumstances of what happened." Moderate voices are calling on Arabs to seize the opportunity created by last week's flotilla confrontation.

"Obama was already facing a challenge with the people - not the leaders - of the Arab world," maintains Nasr. "The majority of Arabs were waiting to see if he will come through on his promises to bridge the gap and promote understanding and mutual respect between East and West."

Michael Crowley with Time Magazine observes too few successes have been achieved in comparison with the major failures that have occurred since Obama's Cairo speech. Citing a new Gallup survey of several Muslim-majority nations, Crowley explains that in Lebanon, Iraq, Algeria, Egypt and the Palestinian territories, "America still has a dismally low standing, one that ranges from approval in the mid-teens (among Palestinians) to 30 percent (in Algeria)." He adds that anti-Americanism and radical ideologies are still thriving, observing that the new beginning Obama promised has "failed to begin."

"Particularly on Israel-Palestine issues, the primary prism through which the US is judged [in the Muslim world], there is a sense that despite the high expectations generated by the speech, the Obama administration is basically more of the same," says Michael Hanna, a Middle East expert at the Century Foundation. "By raising expectations on the front end, the Administration also raised the stakes of inaction."

In a recent briefing for Congress, Pew Research Center president Andrew Kohut, who has polled extensively in Muslim countries, warned that America's standing in the Muslim world will not significantly improve until Muslims view the US as more "fair-minded" in its peace process involvement, believe that American anti-terrorism efforts are not by definition anti-Muslim and see that American forces are no longer at war in Muslim lands.

"By raising expectations on the front end, the Administration also raised the stakes of inaction."

Michael Hanna, Middle East expert at The Century Foundation

Dalia Mogahed, the director of the Center for Muslim Studies at the American pollster Gallup, explains in an interview for Der Spiegel, that one of the main problems with Obama in the post-Cairo era is the "perceived lack of follow-up." She notes that although many would point out the numerous initiatives that the administration spearheaded since, there is a consensus in the Arab world that not enough has been done.

According to Mogahed, "Things like technology transfer or humanitarian aid," would contribute to a fair improvement

in US-Arab relations, although it varies according to the region. She remarks however that the Cairo speech set a new tone in US-Arab relations and detonated the animosity that fermented during the years of the “war on terror,” perceived as a battle waged against Islam.

“What he said in Cairo is a very significant action, and the significance of that speech probably won’t be realized for many years to come,” she concludes.

Regardless of the current political environment, a senior US official has said that the Obama administration is pushing to expand partnerships with Muslim communities around the world by having more comprehensive engagements in areas of shared interest, reports *Gulf Times*. “In today’s complex world, it is critical for our countries to learn about each other, to have discussions and dialogues and debate important issues such as climate change and food security,” Judith McHale, Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, said.

The US official, who was in Doha on a short visit for discussions, emphasized the need for common initiatives to provide opportunities for people, especially the youth, to move forward toward the future. McHale declared, “We must focus on areas such as climate change, science and technology and education; together we can find solutions to these problems and provide new opportunities for the young people around the world as they move forward into the future.”

Highlighting President Obama’s interest in engaging with Al-Jazeera, McHale said that the US administration accorded a lot of interest to media outlets, especially Al-Jazeera. “We do not agree on everything but it would be crazy to expect us to totally have the same opinions,” she said, adding, “We want to make sure that our government representatives are available to Al-Jazeera to answer the questions of the Arab and Muslim world”.

When it comes to major foreign policy issues, it is clear that the White House is charting a very distinctive course in its broader endeavor of building relationships with Muslims, reports Peter Mandaville for *Foreign Policy Magazine*. The news site highlights a new issue, “To the extent that it succeeds, ‘Muslim

engagement’ may begin to reinforce the very sense of exceptionalism it was intended to refute.”

Mandaville emphasizes that peace and democracy in the Middle East have not been central in designing a strategy to engage with the Muslim communities worldwide. Rather, the administration has focused on youth and citizen diplomacy by appointing Farah Pandith as the Secretary of State’s Special Representative to Muslim Communities.

While the youth appreciates the efforts of the Obama administration on that front, its priorities do not match up with the Muslims who are expecting tangible changes in US foreign policy. Mandaville deplores that “the more the United States is out of tune with international sentiment [on the Israeli-Palestinian issue], the more difficult it will be to carry a changing world—witness Turkey’s new assertiveness on the global stage—along with it on other crucial issues.”

Finally, Mandaville recommends that a change in US narrative on conducting engagement with Muslim communities is necessary. “Over time, singling Muslims out as being in need of special engagement becomes a hindrance to normalizing relations insofar as it begins to look like a new form of exceptionalism,” he concludes.

Al-Qaeda’s Harem

The Saudi female Al-Qaeda operative Hayla Al-Qassir, known as “Um al-Rabab”, stirred quite a controversy when she claimed to be one of the most active operatives in recruiting, preaching and funding for the terrorist organization, three months after her arrest by Saudi security authorities, notes Abdul Rahman Al-Rashid for Asharq Alawsat.

Although Al-Qassir’s identity was previously kept under secrecy by the authorities, allegedly to preserve her reputation and the name of her family, Al-Qaeda recently released an audio tape according to Al-Arabiya revealing her name in an attempt to rally members of the organization “to carry out crimes such as kidnapping princes, assassinating state officials and bombing buildings until

[her] released.”

From Al-Qaeda’s statement, Al-Rashid deduces that Al-Qassir must have been a critical element to the organization. He also remarks that she reflects the organization’s aptitude to infiltrate a “closed-off” area of society, namely Saudi women. Al-Rashid ponders the discrepancies between the existing rights and status granted to women by the extremist organization and mainstream Saudi society, noting that the value granted to a woman’s role is enticing women to join organizations like Al-Qaeda.

While in traditional Saudi mainstream society women are confined to very restricted and defined roles, “preventing them from thriving,” in terrorist organizations women are active members, contributing to the logistics and strategic development of the group and fighting alongside the men. Al-Rashid further remarks that in Saudi society, women are deprived of basic rights, such as driving, and are overall considered as “subordinates.”

Perhaps, more importantly, the case of Hayla demonstrates that Al-Qaeda’s ideology still thrives in the Middle East, despite some successes by the security apparatus in preventing some attacks.

Tariq Alhomayed concurs for Asharq Alawsat that women’s rights are a central issue in accounting for the growing number of women attracted to joining Al-Qaeda. He stresses that the terrorist organization does not shy away from exploiting these issues in recruiting members, especially among Saudi women.

Alhomayed adds that the media, society and religious preaching are critical in fighting radicalism. However, he also believes that Muslims are not doing enough to address the issue through these platforms. Additionally, many of the women drawn to Al-Qaeda are driven by emotional reasons or influenced by propaganda disseminated over the internet by extremists, said Abdul Moneim Al-Mushawwah, the head of the Al-Sakina campaign.

Hayla herself was the widow of Al-Qaeda fighter Muhammad Sulaiman Al-Wakeel, killed during a raid in 2004, reports Al-Arabiya. Like Hayla, many women are

driven by revenge and come to justify their crime by the process of “islamization,” where a crime is validated by the religious discourse that comes with it.

Mohammed Al-Hirz, a researcher of political Islam, told Al-Shorfa that “the particularities of a woman, her ability to hide, and the ambiguity surrounding her identity, [are] characteristics that Al-Qaeda members want to take advantage of when the pressure against them is tightened.”

While Al-Qaeda thrives on social inequalities to recruit new members among women, counterterrorism experts warned authorities that these issues need to be addressed to curb the phenomenon. Women in Saudi society enjoy little to no independence and are subject to an ideological conditioning that predisposes them to subservience, which is an ideal mindset for Al-Qaeda.

“It is necessary to increase the amount of information, education and instruction in women’s associations and gatherings and explain to them the ways to make donations and the agencies that are approved by the state to collect these donations,” said activist and lawyer Souad Al-Shammari.

But recruiting by Al-Qaeda transcends the Arab world, where the West provides the organization with a fertile ground for operatives and anonymity, reports The Guardian. Gregory Johnson, of Princeton University, said foreign recruits gave Al-Qaida a dangerous weapon against the West as well as a powerful recruiting tool at home.

“The organization portrays the foreigners as individuals so enamored of the global Islamic community and the Arabian Peninsula that they are willing to sacrifice their lives.” Johnson further explains that Al-Qaeda then shames Yemeni residents publicly, pointing out to them that foreigners are willing to die for them and their land while they remain inactive.

An Australian woman, Shyloh Jayne Giddens, 30, has been held without charge in Sana’a’s political security prison since May 15, charged with being an active recruit for Al-Qaeda. Giddens is not an exception though, as her story is similar to American Muslim convert Colleen LaRose, known as “Jihad Jane,” who

plotted to kill the Swedish cartoonist who drew a controversial picture of the prophet Muhammad.

Bridging the Gap between Internet and Print News

The Dubai Press Club celebrated the success of the 2010 Arab Media Forum, reports Day Press, hosting a gathering during which Maryam Bin Fahad, executive director of Dubai Press Club, praised volunteers and government and private sector institutions, for their support.

“The highly resourceful team at the Dubai Press Club will continue to host events for the benefit of the media sector. We are confident that media professionals, as well as students, will enroll in large numbers for special programs including workshops and seminars that are organized throughout the year at the Dubai Press Club premises,” she announced.

Interaction between citizens and news outlets has a huge impact.”

*Taufik Bouachrine,
Managing Director of
Akhbar Al-Youm Magribiya*

Across the region, other writers, editors and experts converged to exchange opinions at media conferences. At the Fourth Arab Free Press Forum in Beirut, participants discussed the future of the press in the Middle East, reports Emma Heald at the World Editors Forum’s Editors Weblog.

The forum’s panelists discussed the crucial role of the internet in the development of regional media. Brian

Whitaker, former Middle East Editor of The Guardian, warned that the internet is “probably the biggest challenge that newspapers are ever going to face,” as he warned that most print newspapers would disappear within ten to fifteen years.

Editors and writers alike discussed how they adapted to the challenge and transformed their publications to online platforms. Magda Abu-Fadil, a journalism professor at the American University of Beirut, stressed nonetheless that news websites needed to be more interactive with their readers, as in the Arab world many newspapers contented themselves to uploading a pdf document.

“The internet is the best source of information and broadcasting in the world right now, and it has forced an interaction between those who produce information and those who consume it,” asserted Dr. Al-Syed Najm, a researcher and expert on Arab blogging.

According to Heald, Taufik Bouachrine, Managing Director of Akhbar Al-Youm Magribiya, recounted how a man photographed policemen accepting bribes from drivers stopped for traffic offenses. This story, explained Bouachrine, showed that “interaction between citizens and news outlets has a huge impact.”

In another article for the Editors Weblog, Emma Heald recounted the panelists’ discussion on the role of online journalism, discussing the prominent role that bloggers play in reporting and commenting. According to Gamal Eid, executive director for the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), there are about currently 300,000 active blogs in the Arab world.

Daoud Kuttab, founder of AmmanNet, stressed that online publications needed to professionalize their websites and blogs. “The first thing we should do is encourage professionalism,” he maintained, questioning why many sites did not provide accurate and complete information on authors and sources.

The conversation about bloggers and internet publications extended to the Arab Bloggers Forum in Ajman, UAE. Mohammad Talal Badawi maintained that the “lack of a culture of free speech” affects bloggers, reports Duraid Al-Baik for Gulf News. Badawi stressed that the

presence of Arab bloggers was significant as “Arabic language is [ranked] sixth amongst the top languages used on the internet.”

Mohammad Talal Badawi, the second speaker at the conference, told the attendees about his experience with the Saudi Telecom Company. He described how he lost a job opportunity with the company due to comments he had posted on his blog.

Now an employee for the Royal Commission of Jubail and Yanbu in Saudi Arabia, Badawi advocates educating Arab bloggers on etiquette and protocol. “A conference like this might be the right platform to think and ponder [on] how to develop blogging as a new communication and information activity,” he added.

Badawi advised new bloggers to follow “Hawdaj,” which is the abbreviation of four Arab words: “Hadaf, which translates into a clear objective for establishing and writing in a blog; Wa’ie, which means awareness or consciousness; Dafie, which means the motivation and the fourth word is Jumhour which translates into the public or the audience who receive and interact with the message of the blogger.”

Ebrahim Saeed Al-Daheri, Director-General of the Department of Culture and Media in Ajman, described the internet as a “necessity.”

“Perhaps [some] of the best features in the world of information today [are] blogs. Blogging has imposed itself on the scene for its effectiveness and freedom and as a platform for expression and communication and exchange of human experience,” he concluded, stressing the necessity for such a conference.

Helen Thomas Resigns over Controversy

US veteran reporter for the White House Helen Thomas announced her retirement following comments that provoked outrage regarding Israel, reports BBC. During an interview on May 27, when asked whether she had any “comments on

Israel,” she replied that Israelis should get “the hell out of Palestine,” and suggested they go to Poland, Germany or the US.

Thomas’s remarks were made in a video interview with the website RabbiLive.com; she then added, “Tell them to get the hell out of Palestine.” “Remember these people are occupied and it’s their land, not Germany and not Poland,” Thomas continued.

White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs reprehended her comments and she apologized shortly after. While the White House Correspondents’ Association concurred with Gibbs over the matter, they also praised her trailblazing career.

“I deeply regret my comments I made last week regarding the Israelis and the Palestinians,” Thomas said in a statement on her Web site. “They do not reflect my heart-felt belief that peace will come to the Middle East only when all parties recognize the need for mutual respect and tolerance.”

President Obama agreed with her decision to resign, reports The Washington Post, commenting that this criticism comes at a difficult moment for the White House that is at a stalemate in Middle East peace negotiations. The Washington Post remarks that this recent issue is also reviving the debate as to whether it is appropriate to have a columnist in a front row seat at White House briefings.

However, some parties agreed with Ms. Thomas’ statements, particularly in the Middle East, where the recent issues regarding the Gaza-bound flotilla further polarized the region. ABC remarks that Hussein Moussawi, a Hezbollah official, praised Thomas’ “courage,” and said that she resonated with people who believe that Israel is “a racist state of murderers and thugs.”

In the same perspective, Ali Younes for the Saudi newspaper Arab News described Ms. Thomas’ attitude as courageous, “When it comes to speaking the truth about Israeli treatment of the Palestinians and about the extremist Israeli policies in the Middle East.”

Younes then goes into a diatribe, accusing the American media of supporting Israel and attacking Ms. Thomas with

accusations of “Anti-semitism.” Portrayed as a victim of America’s perceived bias towards Israel, he adds that Helen Thomas’ statement “does not differ much from the official US policy that considers the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and East Jerusalem illegal.”

Dubbed “The Thomas Affair”, the controversial story illustrates that Obama’s new beginning pledged in Cairo last year may end up in a deadlock, as long as US foreign policy remains tilted in favor of Israel. Younes adds, “For most people in the Arab world, the perception of the US is that it is a country that subsidizes the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and supports Israel no matter what Israel does.”

“I deeply regret my comments I made last week regarding the Israelis and the Palestinians.”

Helen Thomas, journalist and former member of the White House Press Corps

Diana Mukkaled points out for Asharq Alawsat that upon watching the clip, it seemed obvious that Helen Thomas’s comments were uttered in a jocular manner. She contends that Ms. Thomas’ words generated such controversy because she made the controversial statement at a time of very tense international relations brought about by Israel’s actions towards the flotilla, “which increased the force of the campaign launched by the pro-Israel lobby against the White House correspondent.”

More importantly, stresses Mukkaled, Helen Thomas is a commentator, and her job permits her to express her opinions, whether they provoke controversy or garner praise. She also comments on what she perceives to be an unfair and unequal treatment of Ms. Thomas, by noting that other prominent political commentators were not subject to such

invective criticism despite the “racist” nature of their statements, citing TV and radio personalities “Rush Limbaugh, Glenn Beck, Howard Stern, Sean Hannity, and Bill O’Reilly, to mention just a few.”

Additionally, Mukkaled remarks, “When the proposal to transfer Palestinian refugees to Jordan was officially put forward as one of the solutions to end the regional conflict, nobody was forced to resign and nobody’s career was brought to an end.” She concludes that there is a gross amalgam that is made between comments denouncing Israel’s policies and anti-Jewish rhetoric, “generalizing hostility towards the Jews.” Mukkaled asserts that the White House veteran journalist was definitely not the latter.

Insurmountable Bias?

Tim Franks, a BBC correspondent in Jerusalem, handed in his resignation after allegedly expressing a pro-Israeli point of view in his reporting, reports *The Independent*. As a practicing Jew, Franks faced considerable difficulties in reporting on the Middle East, hindered by everyone’s preconceived notions about his own beliefs.

He explains that consequently, different parties on all sides suspected him of putting forward his own agenda in his work. Franks’ resignation comes at a time when the BBC is under attack for its coverage of the flotilla as “Palestinian groups have complained that the broadcaster’s coverage had relied too heavily on Israel’s version of events.” Conversely, the BBC has also been criticized for taking a pro-Palestinian stance in its coverage.

Franks says that as soon as he was appointed to the job, people in his synagogue expected him to cover the region from a pro-Israeli perspective. “At last you’ll be able to put our side of the story,” they told him.

Likewise, in America, the Associated Press is coming under fire for having hired former CAIR workers to cover stories involving the Muslim community, raising concerns over whether it’s ethical for objective media outlets to hire ex-advocacy group employees to report on

the issues they previously championed, reports News Buster.

Sharaf Mowjood, who used to work as a government relations coordinator for CAIR authored a controversial article in *The New York Times* reporting on the construction of a mosque nearby the 9/11 site. According to News Buster, “all eight of the sources cited in the piece said they approved of the project or lauded its advocate Imam Feisal Abdul Rauf.” The project evidently aroused anger among the family members of the 9/11 victims who found the project “disrespectful” to the victims who had perished in the terrorist attacks carried out by Islamic fanatics.

“Ordinary people who assert their rights present more of a challenge to the status quo than the so-called reformist politicians and opposition parties.”

Brian Whitaker, Journalist and Author of What’s Really Wrong with the Middle East

However, “Mowjood’s article made no mention of legitimate criticism against the planned mosque,” points out News Buster. It merely contented itself in describing the site of worship as a source of potential violence that could stem from anti-Muslim elements.

“[T]here is anxiety among those involved or familiar with the project that it could very well become a target for anti-Muslim attacks,” wrote Mowjood and Blumenthal. “Joan Brown Campbell...who is a supporter of Imam Feisal, acknowledged the possibility of a backlash from those opposed to a Muslim presence at ground zero.”

News Buster criticizes what it perceives to be the “article’s approving tone [...] consistent with the views of CAIR, an adamant supporter of the ground zero prayer center.” CAIR’s executive director Nihad Awad declared to *Arab American News* on May 22 that this mosque could be a “solution” advocating moderation and peace, a view that News Buster entirely disagrees with.

Veteran British journalist Brian Whitaker recently published a book, entitled *What’s Really Wrong with the Middle East*, analyzing the myriad of problems facing Middle Eastern states and highlighting criticisms made by ordinary Arabs about their societies, reports *The Daily Star*. Objective media reports are viewed as a threat to dictatorships’ authority in the Middle East. Whitaker declares, “Ordinary people who assert their rights present more of a challenge to the status quo than the so-called reformist politicians and opposition parties.”

Middle Eastern journalists are forced to align their stories with the official government’s version of events to guarantee power stability rather than attempt to provide accurate coverage that would contribute to the development of political alternatives. Arab regimes’ heavy handed repression of the media impedes any discussion about “rampant corruption, nepotism, family pressures, patriarchy, autocracy and a lack of accountability.”

Whitaker buttresses his argument by adding that submission seems to be instilled from an early age through schools’ curricula. However, globalization, modern technology and especially the internet are rolling back the boundaries, helping citizens of the Arab world shape independent opinions.

Whitaker remarks that until very recently, Europe and the West at large grappled with similar issues they are dealing with today, and if they knew that, “they would be less pessimistic ...to push through the social changes.”

Turkey Realigns Itself with the Arab World

Although historically Turkey has been reluctant to participate in international legal affairs and, along with Israel, has not yet ratified the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, its government is currently pressing for the formation of an international commission to investigate the flotilla raid, reports Karabat Ayse for Today's Zaman. Ayse argues that Israel's ambassador to Washington, Michael Oren, has rejected such an idea, contending that as a democracy "Israel has the ability and the right to investigate itself, not to be investigated by any international board."

Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu stated, "If Israel does not accept such a proposal, it would show their guilt. It is out of the question for us [the Turkish government] to accept any justification for the killing of our citizens."

Despite Turkey's promise of an investigation, the Arab world's response has remained mixed and cautious. Taleb Zaki with the Arab Times cited Kuwaiti columnist and economic researcher Amer Al-Tameemi voicing his criticism towards Turkey, noting that the country is in fact more concerned in keeping good relations with NATO and the West, rather than with the Middle East.

Al-Tameemi explained that the country's historically secular domestic and foreign policy as contributing to his skepticism as to Turkey's realignment with Arab countries.

However, the recent electoral victory of the conservative, religiously minded Justice and Development Party signaled a significant change, challenging the military's authority and also paving the way for an ideological rapprochement with the Middle East. Turkey's response to the freedom flotilla raid has been perceived by many as a turning-point, or at least an indicator of tacit support for Arab policies towards Israel, stated Al-Tameemi.

Zaki added that according to Fahd Al-Hadari, a columnist for Arrouiah Daily, Turkey's perceived pro-Arab response

only came as a nationalistic reaction over the death of 9 of its citizens in the raid, rather than resulting from a policy shift. Turkey has long been an ally of Israel, from the onset in 1949, and it is difficult to conceive that the continued economic and military support of Israel will break so easily.

On the other hand, Al-Dar daily columnist Faisal Al-Ali perceives Turkey as intent upon renouncing its historical ties with Israel, notably with a view to establishing closer relations with the Arab states instead. Yet, Turkey recently denounced any accusations that it aimed to break its ties with the West while fostering better relations with the Arab world, reports the Associated France Presse. Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyipp decried last week that "those who say that Turkey has broken away from the West are the intermediaries of an ill-intentioned propaganda", while pointing out that France also invests in Syria and other Arab countries without facing similar allegations.

Up until the Revolution of 1979, Iran, Israel and Turkey were united as non-Arab Middle East States, and the three states continue to be regarded as the most powerful in the region. However, as a result of the May 31st raid, Yossi Alpher for The Jerusalem Post believes that "Israel is now the odd man out." More concerning to Alpher is the right-wing government officials' contestation that global outcry is both anti-Israel and anti-Semitic, a reaction which "seemingly justifies raising the ramparts of fortress Israel even higher, in a kind of paranoid vicious circle of isolation."

Israel maintains that the naval blockade of Gaza since 2006 is meant solely to prevent the importation of weaponry to Gaza militants looking to attack Israel, report Matthew Chance and Sayah Reza for CNN. Helle Dale from The Foundry further notes that over the past 18 months more than a million tons of humanitarian aid has arrived in Gaza from Israel.

"The Israeli/Egyptian blockade is not in place to keep out food, medicine or building supplies" writes Dale, rather is part of an "effort to minimize the deprivation of the Palestinian population" while preventing the further inflow of weaponry to Gaza militants.

In the United States as well, politicians

and journalists alike have recognized that the American government now faces the difficult choice of siding with Israel or Turkey in response to the Gaza-bound flotilla raid, reports Sharmine Narwani for The Huffington Post.

Since the Reagan administration, the United States has remained a staunch ally of Israel, explains Narwani. However, she notes that "today Israel is a very real strategic liability. We have lost all influence and credibility in the Mideast." The United States' 27 Security Council vetoes between 1984 and 2006 on resolutions critical of illegal Israeli actions or demanding adherence to international law, along with its reliance on Israeli intelligence for all political action in the Middle East, are particularly concerning to Narwani.

In her view, "Israel harms us each and every time it makes a move in the Middle East" for "the whole international community buys into the view that we sanction and support" all its actions.

A 2010 Rand Corporation study recognized Turkey's importance to US foreign policy as it "stands at the nexus of four areas that have become increasingly critical to US security since the end of the Cold War: the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus/Central Asia, and the Persian Gulf region," continued The Huffington Post journalist Narwani. In recent decades Turkey has improved its economy and international influence through strong, innovative treaties with its many neighbors, drawing Narwani to conclude that few countries have served global stability and security better.

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The *Layalina Review* is brought to you thanks to a grant from The Dr. Scholl Foundation of Illinois. Compiled by Layalina Staff. The views expressed here are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Layalina Productions, Inc. Inaugurated in 2002 as a 501(c)(3) non-profit, private sector corporation, Layalina Productions, Inc. is dedicated to bridging the growing divide between the Arab world and the United States by fostering cultural, educational, and professional dialogues through effective commercial television programming. Layalina develops and produces informative and entertaining Arabic-language programming for licensing to satellite and cable television networks throughout the Arab Middle East and North Africa. Layalina is funded solely through tax-deductible donations from individuals and corporations, and through grants by foundations based in the US and the Arab world. Please support Layalina by making a tax-deductible donation. Visit www.layalina.tv or call 202-776-7761 for more information.