

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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The General in his Afghan Labyrinth

Calling the US national security adviser a “clown” and describing President Barack Obama as “uncomfortable and intimidated,” in his first encounter after he took office, commander of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan General Stanley McChrystal and his staff stated candid opinions on top members of this administration in an article published by Michael Hastings for Rolling Stone Magazine. Shortly after publication, Obama responded to the General’s deprecating remarks by relieving him of command, reports Francine Kiefer for The Christian Science Monitor.

Keifer notes that Obama’s decision provided him with the opportunity to reassert his authority and credibility, and the decision to replace McChrystal with General David Petraeus won him widespread appraisal. “While Obama’s brilliance shines here, the softer but perhaps more illuminating light is that of Petraeus,” comments Kiefer.

Greg Sargen with The Washington Post concurs with Kiefer’s view that sacking McChrystal demonstrated Mr. Obama’s strong leadership at a time when he is facing mounting criticism over several domestic issues. Sargen remarks that the debacle disclosed the “tensions between the military and civilian leadership,” possibly endangering the broader campaign strategy in Afghanistan.

Although McChrystal’s dismissal may ease some of these tensions, the rift between both institutions remains deeper than what was perceived, comments Gordon Adams on Budget Insight, a blog by the Washington-based think tank the Stimson L. Center.

Adams explains that Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Adm. Mike Mullen had warned about such problems and the

impact they had on establishing a national security strategy. According to McMullen, one of the most contentious points was the Pentagon’s spending on public diplomacy and strategic communications. The Department of Defense found itself entangled in taking over civilian operations, hampering the development of its military campaign while not being equipped with the right instruments, and consequently fostering resentment.

In addition, the DoD has been playing a greater role in capacity building in Afghanistan, traditionally a civilian task undertaken by the Department of State. Adams points out that it left the Pentagon in charge of spearheading “US global engagement,” a civilian, and presidential responsibility.

Adams warns that leaving America’s statecraft to DoD, an institution that “has no specific or peculiar skills to carry these responsibilities,” can jeopardize America’s image abroad and exacerbate the weakness of America’s civilian institutions of statecraft. Adams concludes that McChrystal’s tirade may only be the tip of the iceberg in rebalancing the “relationship of the White House, State, USAID, and our other foreign policy institutions with the Defense Department.”

However, this is an opinion that The Economist considers “charitable.” The news site argues that despite Petraeus’s expertise and know-how in counter insurgency (COIN) strategy, the war in Afghanistan is still on the verge of failure due to a succession of unresolved problems.

According to Petraeus’ work, the success of COIN is partly based on “unity of efforts,” and McChrystal’s disparaging comments may have undermined this strategy, forewarning a negative outcome to the war. “This infighting and hesitancy signal a lack of commitment that has drowned out Mr. Obama’s warlike rhetoric,” alleges The Economist. Furthermore, according to the British magazine, a lack of confidence in America’s capacity to win the war has

prevented many Afghans and Pakistanis from cooperating with US NATO forces.

Thomas E. Ricks for The Washington Post doubts that General Petraeus will experience the same success in Afghanistan as he did in Iraq. Ricks remarks that the conditions in Iraq were favorable to the General, while Afghanistan is an entirely different story. Among the various factors cited, Ricks explains that Petraeus was able to secure a leadership to a united people, while Afghanistan remains a land of fragmented and feuding groups.

Furthermore, Petraeus’ relationship with the leaders of Afghanistan and Pakistan is less than cordial, and even though he may have forged a strong relationship with Richard Holbrooke, US envoy to Pakistan and Afghanistan, it may prove insufficient, reports The Wall Street Journal.

Perhaps the greatest risk for Gen. Petraeus is the high expectation for his

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leadership in Afghanistan. “If the sense is the guy who won in Iraq is going to march over ... and manufacture victory in a few months, that’s an expectation that no one can achieve,” said Richard Fontaine, a senior fellow at the DC-based Center for a New American Security (CNAS).

“[We have] reason to hope that the president’s first bold move to extricate America from the graveyard of empires won’t be his last.”

Frank Rich, Op-Ed Columnist for The New York Times

The New York Times op-ed columnist Frank Rich adds that the McChrystal debacle perhaps stressed a failure of the president to take timely action against the previously alleged insubordinate general. Last fall, during the question-and-answer session following a speech he gave in London, McChrystal dismissed the counterterrorism strategy being advocated by Vice President Joe Biden as “shortsighted,” saying it would lead to a state of “Chaosistan,” according to the Daily Caller.

Citing the controversial case of the Pentagon’s politically motivated cover-up of Pat Tillman’s friendly-fire death in 2004 in which McChrystal was involved, Rich asserts that the General was a questionable choice from the onset to take over ISAF.

If anything, Hastings’s article confirmed that McChrystal was “out of control” for a very long time and the White House’s attitude was rather “naïve.”

As for the outcome of the war, Rich concludes that there is a disconnect between White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emmanuel’s recent upbeat assessment of

the war, praising a rise in Afghan armed forces and police, and the reality depicted by The Washington Post correspondent Ernesto Londono, reporting that although the rise in number is true, Afghan forces there are poorly equipped, corrupt, directionless and infiltrated by Taliban sympathizers and spies.

After this highly covered scandal, Rich hopes that now people may pay attention to what is happening in Afghanistan.

Al-Hurra under Criticism; Coburn Lifts BBG Hold

The US government funded channel Al-Hurra channel has so far cost 700 million dollars since its inception, but failed to grab the viewer’s attention in the Middle East, according to “US International Broadcasting: Is Anybody Listening?” a report by the staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee commissioned by Senator Lugar (R-IN), notes Noel Brinkerhoff for AllGov News.

According to the report, “given the crowded media environment of the Middle East, either greater resources must be devoted to marketing and promotion or additional programming changes must be enacted in pursuit of increasing (Al-Hurra’s) market share.” The report’s contributors speculate that if the situation does not change, policy makers may have to decide if they should discontinue Al-Hurra’s efforts.

Dafna Linzer of Pro Publica adds that the report cautions against investing more money into what has become the “most expensive foreign broadcasting effort undertaken by the US government.”

Furthermore, Shawna Powers argues for the University of Southern California’s Center on Public Diplomacy blog that Al-Hurra may have actually failed to gain the trust of the viewers in Iraq as well, a country where it claims to be the most successful. Lugar’s report includes data from a previously unreleased survey conducted by Intermedia in February 2010, which concluded that Iraqis across the board don’t trust the

news media by much larger margins than anywhere else in the region.

Powers adds that the report can be at times critical of Al-Hurra’s work, “citing work by Shibley Telhami calling into question the popularity of the broadcaster in the Middle East, a long and ongoing exposé conducted by ProPublica outlining the ongoing management difficulties surrounding Al-Hurra’s operations, and a study commissioned by the BBG and conducted by USC’s Center on Public Diplomacy outlining a multi-methodological and systematic critique of the Al-Hurra’s journalistic quality.”

Ambassador Tom Korologos, a charter member of the BBG and a Layalina founding Director, remarked during a conference entitled Perspectives on US International Broadcasting at The Heritage Foundation that the BBG is comparatively enjoying a very broad outreach that is unmatched, especially in public diplomacy. He heralded Al-Hurra as a success, reaching “60 percent of adults weekly...twice the numbers of the Cold War audiences.”

“Al-Hurra is never going to pander to pan-Arab nationalism.”

Ambassador Tom Korologos, former charter member of the BBG

He then warned against detractors who compare it to Al-Jazeera in terms of popularity and ratings, saying that “Al-Hurra is never going to pander pan-Arab nationalism.” The channel’s mission is to provide accurate news and information to its audiences and unlike indigenous media, Al-Hurra is a free and reliable source of information.

Korologos concluded that the attacks against the BBG are unfounded and that the organization is the “single best communication tool,” the US has ever had.

Following the publication of the report's findings, Senator Lugar urged his colleagues to approve the nominees for the BBG's board on The Huffington Post . "However, should the chronic dysfunction in the confirmation process persist, Congress may well have to consider a new structure to oversee our international broadcasters so that this important tool of public diplomacy gets the consistent management and oversight it deserves," Senator Lugar concluded.

Josh Rogin for Foreign Policy Magazine reports that after months of Congressional impasse, Senator Tom Coburn has agreed to lift his hold on President Obama's nominees for the Broadcasting Board of Governors, set to be confirmed by the Senate. "We have eight great nominees and I'm looking forward to working with them," Coburn told The Cable in a brief interview.

The new Board's responsibility will primarily be to revive the agency that has been criticized for being ineffective. Above all, Rogin comments that they will have to work with Senator Coburn, who previously broadly disparaged the agency as "the most worthless organization in the federal government."

The new board under the directions of former Time Magazine editor Walter Isaacson will also have to deal with inherent challenges. According to Rogin, "Observers will also be looking to see whether Isaacson exerts control over the organization, which is currently run mostly by BBG Executive Director Jeff Trimble, rather than the board, according to Hill sources, employees, and officials there."

Finally, the State Department is also involved in the BBG's management, with secretary of State Hilary R. Clinton being the ninth member, represented by Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith A. McHale. McHale declined to comment to Rogin on the issue, "citing a completely full schedule for the entire month of June."

A Lithium Moment in Afghanistan

News that the American military had

found \$1 trillion's worth of mineral deposits in Afghanistan may turn out to be the results of propaganda efforts to revive and bolster fading popular support for the war in Afghanistan, reports Josey Wales of Before It's News. The story, originally published by The New York Times, stated that "huge veins of iron, copper, cobalt, gold and critical industrial metals like lithium had been found in Afghanistan," holding the capacity to transform Afghanistan "into one of the most important mining centers in the world, the United States officials believe."

"There is stunning potential here," Gen. David H. Petraeus, commander of the United States Central Command, said in an interview. "There are a lot of ifs, of course, but I think potentially it is hugely significant." Jalil Jumriany, an advisor to the Afghan minister of the mines, speculated, "This will become the backbone of the Afghan economy."

Yet the hopes that Afghanistan may become "the Saudi Arabia of lithium" may turn out to be nothing more than a propaganda campaign promoted by The New York Times, according to Before It's News. While the original article claims that the discovery by "a small team of Pentagon officials and American geologists" was made recently, a retired senior US official explains that this "new discovery" was already subject to numerous debates back in the 1980s among the World Bank, the US, the UN and the Russians, among others.

Wales adds that according to a US 2007 Geological Survey, the American government was well aware of "significant amounts of undiscovered non-fuel mineral resources" in Afghanistan, noting that the country has "large quantities of accessible iron and copper [and] abundant deposits of colored stones and gemstones, including emerald, ruby [and] sapphire."

Jeremy White of The Huffington Post notes that while these minerals do exist in Afghanistan, there is nothing new about the story, reminiscent of other news "that preceded the Iraq War when the Bush administration claimed that Iraq's oil wealth would pay for all the costs of reconstruction."

Furthermore, the current war and instability make any mineral extraction or hopes of commercial ventures

a remote dream for now, reports Reuters. The country, in the midst of a wrenching war, possesses almost no mining infrastructure. However enticing the prospects may appear, the risks are too big for investors and companies to mine the mineral resources.

The news of newly found riches of Afghanistan come at a convenient time for the Administration, which failed to gather support for the war in Afghanistan, comments Gareth Porter of IPS News. He explains, "The Obama administration is staring at the specter of a collapse of US political support for the war in Afghanistan in coming months comparable to the one that occurred in the Iraq War in late 2006."

"So that's why we're in Afghanistan... to find/enrich ourselves with the minerals."

John Brown, Adjunct Professor of Liberal Studies at Georgetown University

Steven Hynd with Newshoggers describes the Times piece as "a conveniently timed zombie story... resurrected yet again for political purposes." He adds, "The timing is significant. In the last week, I've had several liberal think-tankers tell me privately that General McChrystal and the Pentagon's beloved COIN ideology are about to have what Gareth Porter terms a '2006 moment.'"

With a slew of bad news about delays, unsuccessful, unreliable local allies and offensives that cannot be called as such in the past few weeks, the think-tankers expect President Obama to hold McChrystal, Petraeus and Mullen to their promises.

John Brown, Adjunct professor of Liberal Studies at Georgetown University, decries the Pentagon's claims in The Huffington

Post, commenting, “So that’s why we’re in Afghanistan... to find/enrich ourselves with the minerals.” Brown criticizes the “Pentagon psy-ops” trying to justify American presence in Afghanistan.

He further disparages the propaganda operation, arguing, “Meanwhile, I suppose, some inside-the-beltway pundits think public diplomacy will solve the madness of the US Afghan occupation, by a country (ours, the beloved country) deep in debt, with oil being spilled, unchecked, over its ecologically fragile, historic Gulf and beaches, with its urban crime rampant, with its educational system failing, and with a military that has no idea where, in ‘Afghanistan’ it’s actually ‘fighting’ – or why.”

In the meantime, Business Insider further mocks the story, explaining that maybe “because people were not impressed with the announcement of \$1-trillion worth of mineral reserves,” Afghan mining minister Waheedullah Shahrani tripled the reserves estimate, claiming that there could be up to “three million dollars.”

Science and Cultural Diplomacy in the News

Judith Ann Stock was confirmed Assistant Secretary of State for Education and Cultural Affairs on June 17, 2010, reports Josh Rogin for The Cable. Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, Judith A. McHale, heralded Stock’s skills, stating, “She will provide terrific leadership of that bureau’s people, programs, and initiatives in public diplomacy.”

In the meantime, the new House Strategic Communications and Public Diplomacy Caucus had its first briefing on June 17, recounts Morgan Roach for The Foundry. This bi-partisan group stressed the need to improve inter-agency performance in public diplomacy and strategic communications. The briefing demonstrated the Obama administration’s “idea that messaging is the responsibility of every agency of the US government,” in “the war of ideas.” Roach added that Pentagon’s better capacities in performing such task justified its

takeover on the operations traditionally assigned to Department of State.

“She will provide terrific leadership of that bureau’s people, programs, and initiatives in public diplomacy.”

Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, Judith A. McHale on Judith Ann Stock

Yet, the Obama administration “has a long way to go before solving the interdepartmental conflicts that still exist,” according to Roach. The briefing attempted to analyze the underlying issues explaining the administration’s refusal to integrate the Center for Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy into its National Communications Strategy.

There may be more than meets the eyes, according to The Imagination Age Blog. Dr. John Brown, former Senior Foreign Service Officer, deplors the lack of importance granted to the role of cultural diplomacy in US Foreign Policy, and explains that it consequently hinders real governmental outreach in the field. He hinges his comments on the Chief of Staff for the Under Secretary of State Judith McHale, Kitty Bartels DiMartino statement that cultural diplomacy falls under the purview of non-governmental groups, rather than governmental agencies.

2000 Pulitzer Prize winner Henry Allen laments in The Washington Post that the counterinsurgency plan to gain hearts and minds is as unsuccessful in Afghanistan as it was in Vietnam. He perceives that counterinsurgency diplomacy is inefficient and destined to fail, “along the lines of Vietnam, Lebanon, Somalia and Iraq.”

Even if locals are open to American

gifts like medical care, as proven by Vietnamese women’ thanks forty years after the war, the “infrastructure” offered by Americans fails to counterbalance the loss caused by the violence, according to Allen. He asserts that goods offered to the population to build their trust, such as cement or gasoline, are in fact arms offered to insurgents who want to avenge their relatives; “How many suicide bombs could Taliban cars deliver with that gasoline?” Allen asks.

Ahmed Zewail, President Obama’s science delegate to the Middle East, argues in favor of US science diplomacy in Los Angeles Times as a means of fostering mutual understanding and cooperation. The reason why the world looks to the US is “its open intellectual culture, its great universities, its capacity for discovery and innovation,” he states.

Basing his remarks on his own experience, Zewail hails education as a tool for greater political and cultural open-mindedness, and in his view, science embodies American values like “freedom of thought and speech” and “equality of opportunity” regardless of origin.

According to Zewail, the US should instead invest in education in the Middle East so as to nurture these pre-conditions to democracy and economic development and revitalize the region’s scientific tradition.

Although Muslim countries are not leaders in education, they benefit from a prominent youth. States such as Turkey and Qatar are leading an educational and economic development that makes the prospect of a new educated generation easily foreseeable.

Nevertheless, he emphasizes that science diplomacy is not self-sufficient, rather is complimentary to traditional diplomacy, the defense of human rights and conflict resolution.

Muslim Disillusionment Growing

A year after the Cairo speech, the Pew Center's Spring survey of global attitudes found that with the exception of Indonesia, Muslims worldwide have expressed a growing disillusionment toward Obama and his foreign policy, notes Spencer Ackerman for The Washington Independent.

The survey's findings indicated that although President Obama enjoys popularity worldwide, benefiting America's standing internationally, Muslims are the exception. Generally, the Muslim community feels that Obama "has not lived up to his promises, especially on the Arab-Israeli conflict," said Marc Lynch, a George Washington University professor and the co-author of a recent Center for a New American Security (CNAS) report measuring Obama's global engagement efforts.

Marc Lynch observed that the Pew numbers demonstrate that Obama's outreach to the Muslim world was in vain. Lynch argued, "It's more that he said he would do things, but thus far hasn't delivered, so the words lose their meaning. It's a real problem for the broader counterterrorism strategy, since winning over mainstream support is absolutely key to the strategy."

However, the outcome of the survey is not entirely negative. Nigerian Muslims give Obama a 70 percent approval rating, an increase from 61 percent in the 2009 poll. The most critical nations are Jordan, where US approval rating has fallen to 21 percent and Egypt, which has reverted to a "pre-Obama rating" of 20 percent.

More importantly, points out Ackerman, a majority of Muslims fear that the US represents a military threat to them, especially in Lebanon, Pakistan, Egypt, Indonesia and Turkey. Ackerman explains, "In Cairo, Obama pledged that the US 'is not, and never will be, at war with Islam,' but many Muslims worldwide believe that the US still has them in its crosshairs." Furthermore, counterterrorism efforts have grown more unpopular

in Muslim countries, to the exception of Lebanon being the only country supporting US war efforts in Afghanistan.

Ackerman remarks that the current administration is well-aware of the challenges that lie ahead in its relationship with the Muslim world and is attempting to find ways to address these issues, even though it has not yet "figured out a programmatic way to overcome them."

Malcolm W. Nance, a counterterrorism and terrorism intelligence consultant for the US government's advocates a reformulation of public diplomacy and strategic communication towards disparaging Al-Qaeda rather than promoting a positive image of America, adds Spencer Ackerman for his Attackerman Blog. However, Ackerman expresses his concerns over the lack of credibility that such US operations hold among the Muslim community. Above all, the Arab-Israeli issue remains central to gaining the trust of Muslims worldwide and to making strides among Muslim communities.

"It's more that he [Obama] said he would do things, but thus far hasn't delivered, so the words lose their meaning."

Marc Lynch, Associate Professor for Political Science at George Washington University

Ackerman remarks, "Public diplomacy and foreign public opinion is not about winning a popularity contest and it's not its own virtue. It's to build up trust amongst foreign publics so that when you occasionally take steps that they disapprove of, it doesn't wreck your relationship." He points out that this administration perhaps made the mistake of assuming that the trust

already existed, relying on it to go further.

Fawaz A. Gerges, professor of Middle Eastern Politics and International Relations at the London School of Economics (LSE), concurs in an article for Arab News that the discrepancy between the Obama administration's Middle East policies and the promising rhetoric of his 2009 Cairo speech may have lost the hearts and minds of the Muslim world. Yet, Gerges assures that it is not too late, recommending "bold steps to achieve a breakthrough in America's relations with the Muslim world."

As Obama's policies in the Middle East have not been transformational, Arabs and Muslims are still awaiting the changes promised in Cairo. Unless the president takes that step, he faces the risk of leaving a legacy of "broken promises" in the region. Gerges warns that it could further rupture America's relationship with the Muslim world.

While some improvements are acknowledged, major issues remain, such as the closure of Guantanamo, the escalation of unpopular wars among Muslims (Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen), the Palestinian-Israeli deadlock and the White House's perceived lenient attitude towards Israel. Gerges remarks that Muslims believe that Obama's "policies are an extension of those of his neo-conservative predecessor, implying that Obama and his policies are a kind of sweetened poison."

Gerges believes that the president may have "misjudged the complexity of the region and the exuberant political costs associated with a transformational strategy," possibly undermining the current counterterrorism and war efforts. Gerges stresses that the building of a viable Palestinian state is pivotal to improving relations and credibility with Muslims worldwide, calling for a reappraisal of foreign policies in the region.

On the other hand, Gerges remarks that Muslims must have realistic expectations and should understand the constraints that Obama faces at home, and their impact on the formulation of his foreign policy. Muslims and Arabs must also play a more active role in charting the course of the foreign policy they wish to see implemented.

Obama's Problems of Policy and Popularity

Eighteen months into his presidency, Barack Obama remains an enigma, writes Richard Cohen for The Washington Post. In his foreign and domestic policies, his personal convictions and his moral compass are hard to ascertain.

In describing what is widely perceived to be his lackluster and delayed response to the oil spill, Cohen explains that what American citizens wanted “was a sign that this catastrophe meant something to Obama, that it was not merely another problem that had crossed his desk.” But, the general impression was that Obama was indifferent to the gravity of the situation.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, Obama's reaction to the oil spill further affected the president's popularity among the British, reports Nile Gardiner for The Telegraph. “In January 2009 Barack Obama was hugely popular on this side of the Atlantic... In June 2010, however, he probably qualifies as the most despised US president since Nixon among the British people.”

Though his popularity has been steadily declining, what Britons perceive to be an overly aggressive and destructive response to BP - Britain's largest company - has deepened popular anger. While acknowledging that BP ought to bear responsibility as the perpetrator of the spill, Gardiner writes that “the brutal, almost sadistic trashing of BP by the imperious Obama administration, which has helped wipe out about half its value, threatens its very future, as well as the pensions of 18 million British people and the jobs of 29,000 Americans.”

Such an aggressive response, coupled with the administration's refusal of help from Britain and other European allies, is perceived by Gardiner as “one of the worst exercises in public diplomacy by a US government in recent memory.” He continues, explaining that it is a “disastrous”

foreign policy move that isolates and weakens American global power.

Nevertheless, Secretary of State Hilary R. Clinton is more successful in rallying support abroad, doing “an incredible job,” reports Sally Quinn for The Washington Post. While describing her diligence, loyalty and commitment to the administrative team, Quinn asserts that Clinton “has managed to do the impossible: she is the ambassador of the United States to the world, maintaining her credibility while playing the bad guy to President Obama's good guy, such as with North Korea, Iran and Israel, and still looking good.”

Such success, Quinn continues, ought to lead Obama to the decision to switch Clinton with Joe Biden, tapping her as Vice President. While a majority in both houses of Congress would have to confirm Clinton's vice presidential nomination, and a majority

“In January 2009 Barack Obama was hugely popular on this side of the Atlantic... In June 2010, however, he probably qualifies as the most despised US president since Nixon among the British people.”

Nile Gardiner for The Telegraph

of the Senate would likewise need to confirm Biden as Secretary of State, Quinn believes such a move would be relatively easy and extremely beneficial.

Quinn argues that Hilary Clinton would be a remarkable campaigner for Obama's 2012 reelection bid, and could furthermore regain many of the

independent voters she'd won in 2008's primary while robbing Republicans' of their “year of the woman” argument. Furthermore, she would still be a logical democratic nominee for 2016 since “based on experience alone Hillary is far more qualified to be president than any of the Republicans being considered today.”

This argument bears no reflection on Biden's own performance, for Quinn also recognizes that “the gaffe-prone former chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee seems to have worked out the kinks” that plagued him in the past. Though he has been an excellent representative for the administration, he nevertheless doesn't have presidential aspirations, and Quinn reports that “those who know him have said that secretary of state is his dream job.”

Meanwhile, Obama's recent nominations for three posts on the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom seem to indicate a possible start to reevaluation of his foreign policy strategy. Jessica Pall for The Catholic Review reports that Obama nominated Reverend Suzan Johnson Cook for ambassador at large for international religious freedom, as well as Felice Gaer and William Shaw as commission members.

Pall describes the commission as “an independent, bipartisan government agency charged with reviewing violations of religious freedom throughout the world and making appropriate policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state and Congress.” The ambassador serves as the principle adviser on religious freedom to the administration and is supported by the State Department's Office of International Religious Freedom. The position has been vacant since Obama took office last January, and the nomination follows a letter signed by 29 religious and civil rights organizations urging Obama to fill the post.

Hillary Clinton responded to the nomination by stating that Obama could not have found “a more fitting choice for this position.” Clinton maintained, “I look forward to working with Dr. Johnson Cook, if she is confirmed, to bring greater focus to international efforts that ensure that people everywhere enjoy the global standards of religious freedom enshrined in the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights.”

John L. Esposito, professor and founding director of the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim Understanding at Georgetown University stated in a phone interview that “a good appointee will promote religious freedom, and at the same time not promote their personal belief...a lot is going to depend on her sense of values and personal skill with this role, as with any candidate, but I wish her the best.”

Technology as a Tool of Empowerment: Playing with Fire?

During a panel discussion in Washington, Caitlin Bergin stated that the State Department has been experimenting with text message-based public diplomacy programs to bolster its outreach efforts, reports Gautham Nagesh at The Hill’s Hillicon Valley blog.

Bergin, representing the State Department’s Office of International Information Programs, commented that texting might be a powerful tool for citizens who feel “unsafe” speaking about certain political issues, especially when mobile phones are widely available and accessible on an international level.

To back-up her argument, Bergin recalled President Obama’s trip to Africa, where the State Department collected more than 200,000 questions from instant messages and text messages sent from all over the continent of Africa.

Technology is “empowering for people,” Bergin stated, providing them with an opportunity to express their political views.

Jared Cohen, a member of Secretary of State Clinton’s Policy Planning staff, opined that the people determine the effectiveness and power of technology, writes William Jackson for Government Computer News’ Cybereye blog. “The technologies themselves don’t choose sides; people do,” Cohen commented.

Jared Cohen is one of the officials leading the United States government’s technological crusade. “You can’t go from zero to 60,” Cohen admitted, alluding to the fact that the government has been slow to initiate programs based on technology and new media. However, he remained optimistic, noting that the State Department now embraces technology as a policy tool.

“We are venturing into a [type of] foreign policy that takes advantage of the technology,” Cohen said, pointing out that many US embassies and ambassadors have already established a Facebook presence.

According to Jackson, Cohen was inspired following a visit to Iran, where he saw young men using Bluetooth-enabled cellular phones. Convinced that “nobody over 30 knows what Bluetooth is,” these men were not concerned about restrictions from the Iranian government.

“The technologies themselves don’t choose sides; people do.”

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

“Communications technologies are the most disruptive innovation since the invention of the printing press,” Cohen asserted. Yet, as the US government adds technology to already existing tools in its diplomatic arsenal, some question whether technology can truly play a significant role in citizen empowerment.

Golnaz Esfandiari, a senior correspondent for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, shared her doubts in an article at Foreign Policy Magazine. Esfandiari believes that the US government and the international media may be giving Twitter too much credit for the events of the Green Revolution in Iran.

She recounted that former top national security advisor Mark Pfeifle recommended Twitter for the Nobel

Peace Prize. “Without Twitter the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident [sic] to stand up for freedom and democracy,” he explained.

“There was no Twitter Revolution inside Iran,” Esfandiari claims. Mehdi Yahyanejad, manager of a popular Farsi-language websites called “Balatarin,” commented that while there was a lot of “buzz” about Twitter in the US media, “most of it [was] Americans tweeting among themselves.”

Three of the most prominent Twitter accounts commenting about Tehran were owned by American, Turkish and Swiss commentators- not Iranians, Esfandiari observes. Discussing the events behind some of the more infamous Twitter accounts, she notes that “an honest accounting of Twitter’s role in Iran would also note its pernicious complicity in allowing rumors to spread.”

Among the rumors were some tweets stating that police helicopters were pouring acid and boiling water on protesters and that the opposition leader Mousavi was arrested in his home at Tehran. Once posted on Twitter, the rumors spread like wildfire.

Although Twitter did play a role in the events that followed Iran’s 2009 presidential election, Esfandiari comments that the hype surrounding Twitter is a “terrible injustice to the Iranians who have made real, not remote or virtual, sacrifices in pursuit of justice.”

However, despite some doubts, the State Department pushes on with its innovative programs and initiatives. “Our goal is to give a voice and open a dialogue to as many people as we can,” said Caitlin Bergin. “Having innovations from other places besides the West is really exciting.”

Arab Media Still Peddling

The Arab Media Forum’s (AMF) Secretary-General, Madhi Al-Khamis, recently announced that the second Arab Media Leaders Forum will take place in early July at the Bibliotheca Alexandria in Egypt, writes Ezzat Shahin for the Kuwait News Agency. “The forum seeks to provide a platform for key media players to share

experience and explore the resources of young media people,” Al-Khamis stated.

Prominent Arab media figures, such as chairmen of satellite TV channels and chief editors of magazines and newspapers, are expected to attend the two-day media gathering and discuss problems facing the current state of Arab media.

“The forum seeks to provide a platform for key media players to share experience and explore the resources of young media people.”

*Media Forum’s (AMF)
Secretary-General, Madhi
Al-Khamis*

According to the Global Arab Network, one of the chief interests of the forum is to highlight the need for utilizing mass media to improve inter-Arab dialogue and “occasionally change] relationships among Arab countries” through sincere and objective discussions. Al-Khamis maintained, “The conferees will hold a constructive dialogue based on transparency and clarity, and explore ways for removing the many obstacles facing the Arab media.”

The forum is also expected to tackle “media economies” and concerns over investing in Arab media. Al-Khamis explains that such concerns may stem from fears that such investments could have “a strong influence in all media organizations at both administrative and editing levels.”

The Arab league meeting for Arab Information Ministers held in Cairo in late June also called for joint Arab efforts to face future media challenges, reports the Lebanese newspaper The Daily Star. Among the attendants was the Lebanese information minister Tarek

Mitri, who focused on the importance of developing the role of Arab media on an international and national level.

Mitri stressed in his speech at the meeting the need for addressing the world in “a unified Arab mode of speech,” pointing out that joint media efforts could organize current situations and remove the cultural and political diversity that surrounds Arab media today, reports iloubnan.info.

However, the information minister warns that “reaching a joint agreement among Arab countries on guiding Arab media” could be an extremely difficult task, since every country has its own stance on the extent of media freedom and restrictions remain prevalent in some parts of the region.

On the sidelines of the Arab Media Forum, the Kuwait Times revealed that Kuwait and Syria are working on boosting general ties and media cooperation by organizing the first Kuwaiti-Syrian Media Forum.

The Kuwaiti Ambassador to Syria, Aziz Al-Daihani, said that the event, which will take place in Syria in early July will be attended by several prominent media figures and journalists. The forum will address “political, cultural and economic dossiers while shedding light on bilateral relations” and will reflect the mutual respect and cooperation between the two countries.

Similarly, in an attempt to strengthen Arab-Turkish ties, Ibrahim Varlik for the Turkish Today’s Zaman reports that the Qatari newspaper Al Sharq Daily has signed an agreement with Turkey’s largest private news agency, Cihan.

This agreement accentuates the impact of the cooperation between media outlets in promoting better understanding between the two nations.

“The media cooperation between Turkey and Arab states should increase. We are saying enough to the news we have received from third parties about each other which has created walls between us. We are now establishing dialogue without intermediaries,” comments Jaber Al-Harami, the deputy editor-in-chief of Al Sharq Daily.

Despite efforts aimed at enhancing the state of Arab media, censorship

still hinders the advancement of media and reporting in some Arab countries. According to ITP.net, Open-Net Initiative’s (OPN) new worldwide Social Media Filtering Map, social media sites are still subject to restrictions or are blocked entirely in countries like Syria, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Freedom of the press remains a victim of government limitations in the Middle East. In Kuwait, a blogger named Mohammad Abdul-Kader Al-Jassem faces up to 18 years in jail after being detained on May 11th following accusations of insulting the ruler and spreading false information about the government, reports Reuters.

The New York based global press freedom watchdog, Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), stated that Al-Jassem’s detention and trial “violated the Gulf Arab country’s constitution, which guarantees a free press,” and urged the Emir of Kuwait to “acknowledge that critical writing such as Al-Jassem’s has an established place in Kuwaiti society and should not be criminalized.”

Israel’s Hasbara at the End of the Tunnel

The Israeli government recently announced that it would ease restrictions on the Gaza blockade, reports YNet News. The decision comes following international criticism of the actions of Israeli Defense Forces aboard Mavi Marmara, dubbed the “Freedom Flotilla.” Israeli Defense Minister Ehud Barak told reporters that the easing of restrictions will allow more goods to reach Gaza “without lifting the sea blockade.”

The announcement did not contain any specific details, such as the types of items which would be permitted to be sent to the Gaza Strip. However, according to the Israeli government, the “existing security procedures to prevent the inflow of weapons and war materials” will continue.

Although some European Union officials applauded the Israeli government following this announcement, others likened the decision to calculated

propaganda. “We want a real lifting of the siege, not window-dressing,” asserted Hamas lawmaker Salah Bardawil. Similarly, the Jordanian government responded, “Any measure that will ease the pressure on Gaza is a step in the right direction, but such cosmetic changes will not resolve the situation.”

Another Hamas spokesman, Sami Abu Zuhri, called the decision “worthless.” He continued, “We are calling for the continuation of international solidarity efforts aimed at breaking the blockade.”

“We want a real lifting of the siege, not window-dressing.”

Salah Bardawil, Hamas lawmaker

Caroline Glick of The Jerusalem Post laments the Israeli government’s decision. “Netanyahu has made these concessions with the full knowledge that they will strengthen Hamas in the hopes that they would weaken the international onslaught against Israel,” Glick comments.

Netanyahu’s outreach to the civilians of Gaza as well as the international community was futile, asserts Glick. “...His hopes were misplaced. Even before Netanyahu announced these concessions, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon already announced that they make no difference to him or to his friends in Washington and Brussels.”

According to The Associated Press, the actions of Israel’s government and security forces alienated many countries—including Israel’s allies. Following the raid of the Mavi Marmara, countries like Ecuador, South Africa and Turkey recalled their ambassadors. The government of Nicaragua broke diplomatic ties with the Israeli government, and Swedish dockworkers launched a week-long boycott of Israeli vessels and products.

Israel is currently engaged in a propaganda war, notes Raymond G. Helmick and Dr.

Nazir Khaja for Arab News. Despite the Israeli government’s attempts to eliminate evidence of what happened on the ships, the international community will soon witness the truth. “Eyewitness accounts have begun to come back from those arrested on the ships. With all clarity it is apparent that the Israeli forces did their best to preempt the account of the story,” they claim.

The Israeli government is scrambling to address the criticism it is facing and to improve the international community’s perception of the Jewish state. Although Helmick and Khaja maintain that the “excellence of the Jewish community in the media field” gives Israel an advantage in the diplomatic war, others disagree.

“The impact of the diplomatic campaign now being waged against Israel will be felt in the medium and long term,” states Caroline Glick for The Jerusalem Post. She argues that the US government, the European Union and the United Nations are engaging in an “assault on Israel.” Similarly, Israeli commentator Ronen Bergman argued that the countries and international organizations were operating with a dangerous “siege mentality,” which may lead to international support for Iran’s nuclear program.

“The new line must be held at all costs,” Glick asserts. “Otherwise, Israel will have no diplomatic line of defense as the approaching threats become reality.”

However, not all Israeli officials are in agreement. The government is hard at work restoring its image and diplomatic relations with the international community. According to the Israeli Defense Minister’s office, Ehud Barak prompted Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to introduce a “daring and assertive political initiative.”

Veteran peace negotiator Yossi Beilin agreed that such a diplomatic initiative geared towards peace is imperative for Israel’s future, reports The Associated Press. “The act that we are so isolated needs a solution and the solution will not be by telling ourselves that we are OK,” Beilin said. He predicted that Israel will be “doomed” if the government does not initiate and push the peace process forward.

Yet, Bergman saw the issue from a different perspective. “The problem is not with the marketing. The

problem is with the product and the product is damaged. You can’t market occupation,” Bergman commented.

The Israeli Security Council, a private initiative, held a conference to discuss the problems posed by ineffective hasbara (public diplomacy) efforts, reports Ben Hartman for The Jerusalem Post.

“As part of a real attempt to give answers to the problems of hasbara, the Israel Security Council will present papers showing their standing on a number of different issues, and will take a look at the world and assess what Israel can do to change its image,” elaborated the Council in a statement about the conference.

The organization’s 28 members, who come from the fields of security, diplomacy and statecraft and media, will individually present a plan of action. These presentations will inform the Council’s position papers on internal and external hasbara.

According to the Security Council’s press release, “Israel’s image is right before our eyes becoming a national security problem for the State of Israel. A need has been created for someone to fill this vacuum and designate the goals and objectives needed for hasbara.”

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