

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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NASA's Outreach to Muslims Grounded

In a recent interview with Al-Jazeera, NASA Administrator Charles Bolden claimed that his "foremost" mission as head of the American space agency was to improve relations with the Muslim world, in accordance with President Barack Obama's aim to bring scientific and technological outreach "to dominantly Muslim nations," reports Fox News. Bolden asserted, "Strengthening those ties was among the top tasks President Obama assigned," as better relations could ultimately contribute to the advancement of space travel.

Fox News comments that Bolden was in Cairo on June 4, 2010, marking the one year anniversary of the president's speech. Although he spoke at the same university, Bolden denied allegations that he was on a diplomatic mission in Cairo.

Bolden's interview with the Qatari network stirred quite a firestorm, and though NASA and the White House stood by his statements shortly after the interview, the space agency clarified that such international diplomacy is not Bolden's "foremost" responsibility, according another Fox News article.

Former NASA Administrator Michael Griffin argued, "NASA... represents the best of America. Its purpose is not to inspire Muslims or any other cultural entity." While Griffin believed that collaboration with other nations, including Muslim ones, is a positive step, he argued that it is neither a priority nor vital to the US space program's advancement.

In a written statement, White House spokesperson Nick Shapiro explained that NASA seeks to engage with the world's best scientists in order "to push the boundaries of exploration" and that international cooperation is vital in achieving this objective. Yet Griffin

disagreed, for while he welcomed such cooperation, he believed the US does not need international help to achieve progress.

Byron York for The Examiner echoes Fox News's reaction, pondering over the transition and shift of the space agency's mission. "Everyone had the same impression: Is this what he is spending his time on?" asks a Republican Hill aide who tracks the space program. "A lot of people are very upset about it." According to the news site, this could indicate a change in NASA's mission and its future development.

Apollo 13 commander Jim Lovell decried President Obama's vision for the agency, describing it as a "devastating" scheme that "destines our nation to become one of second- or even third-rate stature." York further remarks that NASA's outreach to Muslims directly results from the president's Cairo speech, in which he announced the creation of "science envoys" and funds "to support technological development in Muslim-majority countries."

Obama appointed Egyptian-American scientist Ahmed Zewail as the first science envoy to the Middle East. Recently, Zewail argued that the US can build better relations with the Muslim world by "harnessing the soft power of science in the service of diplomacy." The NASA initiative fits in perfectly with Zewail's vision.

In another article for The Examiner, Byron York explains that although members of Congress were shocked by Bolden's comments, they were more disturbed by hearing about NASA's objectives on Al-Jazeera before they were personally informed on the matter. York alleges that Bolden briefed both Representative Pete Olson, the ranking Republican on the House Subcommittee on Space and Aeronautics, and Representative Gabrielle Giffords, Democratic chair of the subcommittee, on the president's new space policies several days after the Al-Jazeera interview was released.

York posits that Bolden may find some strong resistance among members of the American public as well as Congressional officials. While major broadcasting networks and news outlets have not reported on the issue, Olson speculated that Americans will react negatively once learning about the plan. Julie Millican for Media Matters in America believes that the right-wing media is over-reacting solely because of the mention of the word "Muslims."

NASA has also recently announced that Arab students from the United Arab Emirates would be joining its internship program, reports Gulf Times. As part of an agreement between NASA and the non-profit Arab Youth Venture Foundation, up to a dozen UAE students will be selected each year to participate in projects with the space shuttle, space station, solar system exploration and aeronautical

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research missions. Three UAE students were inducted into the program shortly after the statements by NASA Administrator Bolden aired on Al-Jazeera.

It appears that Bolden had to backtrack on his comments, points out Emma Willicot at Techeye. NASA assistant administrator for public affairs Bob Jacobs explained, "Administrator Bolden understands that NASA's core mission is exploration, both in space and in scientific endeavors here at home."

"NASA's purpose is not to inspire Muslims or any other cultural entity"

Michael Griffin, former NASA administrator

Furthermore, the White House also later denied having tasked Bolden with reaching out to Muslims, notes the Associated Press. During a briefing, White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs denied that such activities had been assigned to Bolden and declared that administration officials had since talked to NASA to clarify matters. Gibbs added that Bolden probably misspoke.

Despite his sterling credentials as a former astronaut and military man, Bolden "has been a bit of a headache for the White House," says Ed O'Keefe at The Washington Post. Rumors are circulating that he was appointed only after Sen. Bill Nelson (D-Fla), Bolden's former space shuttle crewmate, nominated him before President Obama appointed Bolden to his position.

CNN Fires Journalist over Twitter

The American news network CNN

fired its senior editor for Middle Eastern Affairs, Octavia Nasr, following a message she posted on her personal Twitter account, in which she expressed her respect for the Shiite cleric the Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, who had died a few days before, reports The New York Times. CNN officials declared that the twenty-year news veteran's comments reflected an "error of judgment" on her part.

On her Twitter account, Nasr wrote that she was "sad to hear of the passing of Sayyed Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah ... One of Hezbollah's giants I respect a lot." The New York Times describes Fadlallah's writing as an inspiration to the Dawa party of Iraq and portrays him as a man who routinely denounced Israel and the United States, while allegedly supporting suicide bombings against Israeli civilians.

The day following her initial post, Mrs. Nasr clarified that she admired Fadlallah's view on women's rights and his stand against honor killing and abuse, although she did not agree with his other political views. However, the argument failed to redeem her in the eyes of CNN's officials, (who employed former AIPAC official Wolf Blitzer as its primary news anchor for the last 15 years) and ultimately went forward with firing her.

Parisa Khosravi, the senior vice president for CNN International Newsgathering, declared in a memorandum, "At this point, we believe that her credibility in her position as senior editor for Middle Eastern affairs has been compromised going forward."

Reportedly, Israeli supporters alerted the news channel of Nasr's post, remarks Roy Greenslade for The Guardian. In a blog posting Nasr wrote, "Reaction to my tweet was immediate, overwhelming and provides a good lesson on why 140 characters should not be used to comment on controversial or sensitive issues, especially those dealing with the Middle East."

Nasr's dismissal sparked controversy worldwide, generating a large online campaign started by her supporters across the Middle East and the US, reports France 24. The US site "The Next Web," which specializes in new media trends, found it "strange" that a "simple message" would be taken so "out of context." Jillian

C. York, a writer and researcher at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet & Society, described CNN's decision as a "disgrace to the American media."

York criticized what she considered "double standards" on freedom of expression. Samih Touqan, founder of the famous Arabic portal Maktoob, Mohamad Takriti, CEO of iHorizons (the company developing most of Al-Jazeera's online portal) and several other Arab media moguls, echoed York's sentiment. W The media figures denounced what they perceived to be an "unacceptable infringement of freedom of expression."

Arab Americans also saw her dismissal as characteristic of the double standards they perceive in the American media's Middle East coverage, according to Sify. "This is unbelievable what is happening in the United States of America," said Osama Siblani, publisher of the Arab American News, before adding, "You can say anything you want - except when it comes to Israel."

"You can say anything you want - except when it comes to Israel"

Osama Siblani, publisher of The Arab American News

Marc Lynch, an associate professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University and a blogger on Foreign Policy's website, tweeted, "I'd threaten to stop watching CNN if I ever watched CNN, but sadly CNN's programming put an end to that long ago." His colleague at Foreign Policy, Harvard professor Stephen Walt, described CNN's decision as "spineless."

However, conservatives such as Newsbusters' publisher Brent Bozell deemed CNN's actions a "step in the right direction."

Hezbollah also denounced the CNN senior editor's firing, likening the network's decision to "intellectual terrorism," reports Hurriyet. Renay

San Miguel with Tech News World explains that Nasr's 140-word Twitter post was taken out of context. San Miguel criticizes CNN's decision, which he perceives as too harsh and too quick. CNN's hasty decision could further jeopardize the channel's future.

San Miguel argues, "CNN in its current weakened state can ill afford to lose another experienced, valuable journalist who can speak Arabic and help guide American viewers through the culture and politics of a vital part of the world." He further warns about the importance and impact of new media and how they can end the distinguished careers of "old-media newsies" in an instant

This incident is reminiscent of Helen Thomas' resignation earlier this year, in which she ended her 60 year career, due to disparaging comments about Israelis, remarks Glenn Greenwald at Salon. Likewise The Washington Post recently accepted the "resignation" of Dave Weigel because of scornful remarks concerning right-wing figures such as Matt Drudge and Rush Limbaugh.

Greenwald writes that "what each of these firing offenses have in common is that they angered and offended the Neoconservative Right. Isn't that a strange dynamic for the supposedly Liberal Media: the only viewpoint-based firings of journalists are ones where the journalist breaches neoconservative orthodoxy?" Greenwald also denounces the bias that he perceives in news reports on the Middle East.

Greenwald cites the example of Chas Freedman. Despite an accomplished record of public service, Freedman was barred from a government position due to an intense AIPAC-led campaign against him. Juan Cole's alleged anti-Israel comments denied him a tenure at Yale and Noam Finkelstein who "suffered the same fate." Greenwald then states that Nasr's case is an illustration of American discourse "is completely distorted and dumbed-down by the same stunted, cartoonish neo-con orthodoxies that have also destroyed our foreign policy."

Fadlallah, known for being one of the key founders of Hezbollah, consistently denied being the militant group's spiritual father and never acknowledged any involvement in the bombings, although

never denounced them. Greenwald points that many US allies, such as Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki or Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, also praised Fadlallah upon his death.

Additionally, Greenwald remarks that the firing of Mrs. Nasr illustrates American media's failure to comprehend the complexity of the Middle East and figures like Fadlallah, while simultaneously promoting a pro-Israel agenda under a guise of "objectivity."

Ground Zero Tolerance

A group of Muslim Americans seeking to build a community center named The Cordoba House in Manhattan next to the 9/11 site, known as Ground Zero, faces strong protests from several groups in the New York city area opposed to the construction of what they misleadingly call the "Ground-Zero Mosque," reports Alex Pareene of Salon. "Through misinformation and shameless fear-mongering," he alleges, protectors managed to rally 36 percent of Manhattan inhabitants to support their cause. The poll did not report how Muslims as a religious group felt about the community center.

Pareene denounces some of the attacks and implications that have been made against the Cordoba House, such as the allegation by GOP gubernatorial candidate Rick Lazio, who implied that the provenance of center's funds is unclear, thus raising suspicions of terrorist ties. The Cordoba House is a joint effort between the American Society for Muslim Advancement and The Cordoba Initiative, which states that its mission is to improve relations between Muslims and the West.

Ironically, Pareene remarks that televangelist Bill Keller proposed "a solution" to assuage an alleged fear of growing radicalization: a one million dollar "Christian center in lower Manhattan in response to the Cordoba Initiative's plans for a 13-story mosque and community center there."

"If they can put a mosque near Ground

Zero, we should be able to put a Christian center near Ground Zero and give people a choice," Keller said in a phone interview. He stated that the Islamic center was "a spit in the face of the people of New York."

Pareene dismisses this idea, pointing out that there is already a church near the Ground Zero site. He additionally questioned Keller's motives and past, as the televangelist spent some time behind bars.

Bill Keller described his moment of revelation that led him to plan his own 9/11 Christian Center near Ground Zero to Charisma Magazine. "I was in prayer and God said, 'Listen, if the Muslims can build a temple to their false god at Ground Zero, why can't there be a place dedicated to the true God of the Bible on that same area?'" said Keller, whose website claims 2.4 million subscribers. , "Rather than a [protest] event we're going to have an ongoing work of God right there because the Bible says you combat the darkness with the light," he continued.

"Our purpose is to interweave America's Muslim population into the mainstream society"

Feisal Abdul Rauf, Chairman of the Cordoba Initiative

Feisal Abdul Rauf, an imam based in New York and Chairman of the Cordoba Initiative, explained that the principal aim of the center is to prevent radicalization and the recurrence of events like 9/11. He added that The Cordoba House will include a public memorial to the nearly 3,000 victims of the terrorist attack.

"My colleagues and I are the anti-terrorists," Rauf wrote in a New York Daily News op-ed. "We are the people who want to embolden the vast majority of Muslims who hate terrorism to stand up to the radical rhetoric. Our purpose is to interweave America's Muslim population into the mainstream society.

Yet many remain opposed to the project and the building of the center, with various groups attempting to confer landmark status on a century-old building at the proposed site. New York's Landmarks Preservation Commission held a hearing to debate the issue, reveals Charisma, but the final decision won't be announced until later this summer.

Some critics of the project have expressed their disagreement with the building of The Cordoba House, claiming that "building a mosque so near Ground Zero would be viewed as a victory for Muslim terrorists." Many interpret the project as an attempt to impose political Islam in New York.

"The situation in New York is really insulting," said James Lafferty, head of the Virginia Anti-Shariah Task Force. Last month, he led a protest against the building of The Cordoba House. "All of the people who were involved in the cowardly attacks on the World Trade Center were from radical Islam ... and they are now establishing a mosque ... in the shadow of the World Trade Center," he stated.

James Lafferty, head of the Virginia Anti-Shariah Task Force who led a protest last month against the building of Cordoba House, whose wife Andrea Lafferty is executive director of the Traditional Values Coalition, said that the Islamic center is part of an effort to establish Shariah law in the US. "Building a mosque near Ground Zero is like building a memorial to Hitler at Auschwitz," was one of the phrases on a protester's sign, reports Aline Reynolds at The Downtown Express. A group of men with Vietnam veteran hats carried a banner that read: "All I need to know about Islam, I learned on 9/11."

The debate was also taken on TV where CBS and NBC have refused to air a controversial advert funded by the National Republican Trust, a conservative group not affiliated to the Republican Party, condemning plans to build The Cordoba House, reports the BBC. The video entitled "Kill the Ground Zero Mosque," describes the center as a "monstrosity" that will invite further attacks on the US.

The video has been relatively popular on YouTube, receiving over 100 000 pages, but as to date of publication, it is

unclear if other networks in the US will broadcast it. In emails obtained by the news website Politico, NBC Universal advertising standards manager Jennifer Riley wrote that because it did not make a distinction between terror groups and the religious organization behind the mosque, "the ad is not acceptable under our guidelines for broadcast".

The advert displays "dramatic images" of the 9/11 attacks and "images of rejoicing Islamic militants set to a soundtrack of Muslim prayer."

Alex Parenee of Salon expressed his concern that the behavior displayed by Keller and his supporters may convey the idea that America has become an anti-Muslim nation. Reynolds concurs and concludes that Muslim Americans feel demonized and that as far as they are concerned "the damage is done."

France Bans the Burqa

On July 13, the French Parliament voted to ban the Burqa in public spaces by an overwhelming majority - 335 votes against 1 - reports French magazine Le Figaro. The ban passed with broad support from right-wing parties and some left-wing politicians. Though the Socialist Party, French communists and the Green Party abstained from voting, party members have expressed their opposition to the veil and the burqa.

The bill will be officially presented to the Senate in September, but is widely expected to become law despite concerns expressed by French Muslims who fear stigmatization. One of the arguments supporting the ban states that "hiding your face from your neighbors is a violation of French values," reports Angela Doland for The Washington Post.

According to Doland, France's Justice Minister Michele Alliot-Marie's speech at the National Assembly marked the start of parliamentary debate on the bill. Many law scholars argue that such a law would violate the constitution.

The government has used various strategies to sell the proposal, slating it

as a way to promote equality between the sexes, to protect oppressed women or to ensure security in public places. The planned law would be a turning point for Islam in a country with the largest Muslim population in Western Europe.

France is determined to protect the country's deeply rooted secular values and its conservative government is encouraging a moderate, state-sanctioned Islam that respects the secular state. Last week Prime Minister Francois Fillon inaugurated a mosque in the Paris suburbs.

"[The burqa is] a symbol of far-reaching Islamism and a totalitarian political identity that's against equality between the sexes and advocates violence."

Mattias Karlsson, media spokesman of the Sweden Democrats

The legislation would forbid face-covering Muslim veils such as the niqab or burqa in all public places in France, including the street. Revoking the law will result in fines of euro150 (185 US dollars) or citizenship classes for women who disobey the law. In some cases, women will receive both the fine and the requirement to attend the classes.

Parts of the bill specifically targets husbands and fathers, in the eventuality that they would impose such veils on female family members. "Anyone convicted of forcing a woman to wear such a veil risks a year of prison and a euro30,000 fine - with both penalties doubled if the victim is a minor," remarks Doland.

France "does not accept attacks on human dignity," Alliot-Marie said. "It does not tolerate the abuse of vulnerable

people.” Far from being an isolated case in Europe, authorities in several neighboring countries have been debating similar bans. In May, Belgium was the first country to enact a ban on the face-covering veil, although it is still pending ratification by the upper-chamber

“We are in favor of a ban for full-covering veils,” media spokesperson for the Sweden Democrats Mattias Karlsson said, reports Alexandra Sandels for The LA Times. “It’s a symbol of far-reaching Islamism and a totalitarian political ideology that’s against equality between the sexes and advocates violence. It’s like putting the responsibility of men’s instincts on the women.”

Said Aalla, president of a mosque in the eastern city of Strasbourg, does not entirely disagree with the enacting of the ban, but is rather concerned, like many French Muslims, about the way police will enforce it. “Is this a law that is going to be implemented in a serene way, so as not to stigmatize the Muslim population?” he asked.

Observers say the burqa ban is in fact a virtual issue, a way to raise Islam in a secular society where religious identity is not a public subject, remarks Robert Marquand for The Christian Science Monitor. The burqa debate allows for talk of French culture, the future of Europe, growing minorities, the rights of the individual, security, feminism, and citizenship – all with an Islamic subtext.

“Seventy percent of the talk about ‘national identity’ in France is aimed at Islam,” says Kouyate Madony, the Malian proprietor of a dress shop halfway between the two mosques in Barbese. “It’s election politics.”

Locals expressed different opinions. Two non-Muslim Parisians at a cafe that serves alcohol commented that they loved the area of Goutte d’Or in Paris, adding that it has always been a place of immigrants. But the police and community leaders remark that the core of the problem in this area is not Islam; it is drug dealing.

The city is joining with Muslims here to replace the El-Fath Mosque with a \$25 million community center open to non-Muslims that will include a larger mosque. Muslims will contribute \$5 million. The project is a direct response to a public

demand in order to keep streets open on Fridays. Officials at El-Fath support the burqa ban and take a pro-French state, pro-security stand on most matters.

However, among believers, there is concern over a growing “anti-Islam” sentiment. Marquand explains that Moham-mad, on his way to pray at El-Fath, fears that there could be some opposition to the center. “Whether we pray in a mosque, in a basement, or on the street doesn’t matter. It is the presence of Muslims they find objectionable.”

BBG’s New Leadership Brings New Opportunities

The Senate recently confirmed the new and bipartisan Broadcasting Board of Governors after seven month of political bickering, reports Kim Andrew Elliott for The New York Times. Former CNN Chairman Walter Isaacson will now head the Board and administer American media projects such as the Voice of America, Radio Free Europe, Al-Hurra TV and TV Marti.

Al Kamen for The Washington Post heralded the Obama administration’s efforts for filling 76.8 percent of the 526 high-level federal jobs, among which were the recently confirmed BBG members.

According to Radio Info, the BBG had been without a full Board since 2004. Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry was largely responsible for the confirmation. Kerry spearheaded efforts to reach a compromise with Oklahoma Republican Senator Tom Coburn, who was holding his vote on the approval of nominees, reports the news site.

Coburn vividly criticized the BBG, disparaging the agency as a waste of money. He argued that broadcasting in foreign countries should not be a priority in the American government’s agenda. In order to secure Coburn’s vote, Sen. Kerry pledged additional governmental monitoring on the BBG’s activities and provided the Oklahoma senator with the position as a “guest of the committee.”

Nonetheless, Elliott for The New York Times remarks that the BBG faces numerous challenges, including a fierce competition with other international media outlets such as the British Broadcasting Corporation’s World Service. Elliott blames the bureaucracy, lack of coordination and organization, noting that the situation may worsen after the White House directed federal agencies to develop plans trimming at least 5 percent of their spending in June 2010.

Elliott remarks that the budgetary cut may be a salutary move for the BBG, which has an annual budget of \$757 million, but fails to channel the funds efficiently and blames the duplication of efforts in broadcast. He notes, “Instead of having one entity that produces all broadcasts, American international broadcasting is a collection of often redundant agencies working under the banner of the Board of Governors.”

Elliott believes that the new board will have an opportunity to remedy to the situation by proposing “to Congress and the Obama administration a merger of the separate broadcasting entities into one corporation under the board’s supervision, similar to the BBC World Service.”

A good tip for the BBG’s new leaders for managing their personnel would probably be Senator Kaufman’s advice to Tom Fox for The Federal Coach: “Your word is your bond”. Senator Kaufman, former member of the BBG, asserts a federal leader must be trust-worthy, always check the facts and remain transparent.

Kaufman exalts federal agents as “superstars” and honors them for being willing to “make a difference”. He decries people who blacken federal employees and quotes John Gardner’s book “Excellence”, arguing that “a society that values its philosophers and doesn’t value its plumbers - because philosophy’s uplifting and plumbing isn’t - will be a society where neither its ideas nor its pipes will hold water.”

Al-Qaeda's English Magazine: Authentic or Fraud?

What appears to be the first-ever English language propaganda magazine published by Al-Qaeda surfaced on radical Islamist websites last week, reports Hindustan Times. The magazine, named Inspire, bears the emblem of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), based in Yemen.

Due to a corrupting Trojan virus, only 3 of the 67 pages of the magazine are viewable, continues Hindustan Times. This technological mishap, as well as the English is described by The New York Times as "crude and clunky, almost to the point of being laughable." These elements generated a general sense of disagreement regarding the document's authenticity.

Hindustan Times argues that such language reflects either a poor grasp of English or an uncharacteristic self-parody by the proclaimed Al-Qaeda authors. Furthermore, the news agency remarks that Al-Qaeda leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahiri make few public statements, yet when they do, they speak directly to the media rather than through intermediaries, further raising suspicions

Technology experts cited in The Atlantic point out that Al-Qaeda and its affiliate branch in Yemen AQAP have successfully used PDFs and new media forums to disseminate the organizations' message in the past. Therefore, Inspire's basic technological deficiencies make little sense. Such factors led The Atlantic to the conclusion that "the most likely culprit could simply be mischievous, if knowledgeable pranksters in the US who wanted to disseminate a Trojan virus among jihadi forum visitors."

Nevertheless, others seem convinced of the magazine's authenticity, as the Herald Sun reports. "The magazine, according to intelligence sources, is seen as a direct step toward the recruitment of Americans and an effort to further penetrate the US market." Representative Pete Hoekstra, top Republican on the House Intelligence Committee, echoed this sentiment. He stated, "This is an unfortunately well

done magazine that is proof positive that Al-Qaeda and its affiliates have launched a direct appeal for Americans to launch small-scale attacks here at home."

Likewise, AFP described the magazine as one that "appears to have been designed with care", parts of which "have a friendly, if extremist, scouting manual feel."

"A glossy online product that might be described as a mix of "Jihadists Illustrated" and "Popular Jihad Science"."

Peter Grier of The Christian Science Monitor

Although only 3 of 67 pages are available, many of the articles' humorous titles, such as "How to make a bomb in the kitchen of your mom," fuels further skepticism and confusion, reports Peter Grier for The Christian Science Monitor. Grier continues by describing the magazine as "a glossy online product that might be described as a mix of "Jihadists Illustrated" and "Popular Jihad Science.", commenting that such titles seem better suited for a satirical publication like The Onion. However, he also notes that an English-language publication does fit well in Al-Qaeda's evolving outreach strategy and such a publication had been announced by AQAP, as originally reported by The Atlantic Post.

Al-Qaeda members, whose work is listed as featured in the publication include Osama bin Laden, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, and others referring to themselves as "AQ Chef" and "Terrorist," reports Erik Stakelbeck for CBN. Stakelbeck adds that the magazine appears to be the brainchild of Al-Qaeda cleric Anwar Al-Awlaki, an American born jihadist linked to several recent terrorist plots in the United States and whose superior command of English has led some to argue that his

influence now surpasses even bin Laden's.

Elsewhere in America's 'War on Terror', Ken Guide described this past week as relatively good for the Obama administration in his article at The Huffington Post. New information was revealed in the case of Najibullah Zazi, who has pled guilty to allegations of helping plan the New York subway-bombing attempt, and Osama bin Laden's chef has pled guilty to charges of material support for terrorism and conspiracy at Guantanamo, marking the Obama administration's first conviction in military commission.

Pointing out that the aforementioned chef has offered no beneficial military intelligence and that his conviction follows a string of convictions against lower-level operatives, Guide satirically concludes, "so now that the Bush-Obama military commissions have convicted Osama bin Laden's driver and his baker, I am sure his candlestick maker is next."

Rotana Goes Yahoo!

American Internet provider Yahoo! signed a distribution agreement with Arab media conglomerate Rotana, reports Adam Gonn for The Media Line. Gonn describes the partnership as "one of the largest-ever cooperation agreements between US and Arab communication providers." Arabic-speaking audiences will gain access to Rotana's music, film, television and radio programming through Yahoo! Middle East's new Video Network Channel.

Rotana is the largest Arabic music producer and a major distributor of Arabic-language films, having produced over 1500 titles, reports Ben Flanagan for The National. In addition, Rotana owns radio stations, a digital media group and major free-to-air television channels including LBC Sat, Cinema, Khalijia and Mousica.

These and other satellite channels currently occupy 20 percent of the television market in two key MENA countries, Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The Rotana Group hopes that this figure can rise to 30 percent following a deal with Disney reached at the end of 2009, Gonn reports. Despite strict

standards in the religiously conservative Saudi Arabia, it is largely believed that the political influence of Rotana's owner, Prince Waleed bin Talal (worth an estimated 19 billion dollars and the 16th richest man in the world according to Forbes), has given the organization relative freedom in its programming and helped to broaden its popularity.

Yousef H. Mugharbil, President of Digital Media at Rotana, believes that the Yahoo! deal will expand future opportunities for the company, continues Gonn. In a statement regarding the agreement, Mugharbil explained that "as the region's largest entertainment company for quality Arabic content we are always looking to sustain a healthy growth in our audience numbers" and furthermore that "Yahoo!'s entertainment network is the ideal platform to utilize for the ever-growing Arab online world."

"Yahoo!'s entertainment network is the ideal platform to utilize for the ever-growing Arab online world."

*Yousef H. Mugharbil,
President of Digital Media at
Rotana*

Yahoo! is similarly optimistic about the benefits of the agreement, reports Khaleej Times. "This is an exciting and important development for Yahoo Middle East as we continue to strengthen and support Arabic content on the Internet and introduce more innovative and locally relevant content and products for our consumers in a highly engaging platform", stated Ahmend Nassef, vice-president and managing director of Yahoo Middle East.

The Rotana deal marks Yahoo!'s second deal with Arab media, reports Gonn. Last year, Yahoo! purchased Maktoob.com, the Arab world's largest online

portal. Mr. Nassef explained that this most recent deal with Rotana "is part of a bigger effort to increase the quality and quantity of relevant content. We want to partner with content owners at all levels," Flanagan reports. Yahoo! is also currently in negotiations with the Abu Dhabi Media Company (ADMC) for secondary rights to stream English Premier League football matches over the website.

For the moment, Rotana content will be free to consumers on Yahoo!, with revenue made from advertising on the site, yet the two corporations have not ruled out developing a premium, pay-to-view feature in the future, notes Flanagan.

Middle East Peace Negotiation: A Light at the End of the Tunnel?

Following the recent "tectonic shift in American-Israeli relations," the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited President Barack Obama earlier this month in an attempt to amend the tarnished relationship and debunk criticism, writes Nadia Hijab for The Hill's Congress Blog.

The Israeli decision to expand Jewish settlements in the occupied East Jerusalem area, and the latest Gaza flotilla attack have generated international disapproval of Israel's strategy and sparked concern over the declining relationship between the two nations.

While the Obama administration's reaction to these issues was perceived by some as apathetic towards the Jewish State, leaving them unaddressed would have diminished the President's credibility in the Muslim world.

According to the Martin Indyk of The Brookings Institute, Netanyahu's meeting with Obama was bound to succeed as the president finds himself in need to "calm Jewish voters offended by his previous backhanded treatment of America's Israeli ally," in the run-up to the US Senate elections in November.

On the other hand, the success of the meeting would offer Netanyahu a chance

to steer the situation back in Israel's favor. The Israeli Prime Minister is aware of the importance of maintaining a good standing in American public opinion for the sake of his country, should a two-state solution emerge, writes Ray Hanania at The Jerusalem Post.

While Hanania condemns Israel's latest blunders, he also attributes the failure of the peace talks to the ineffectiveness and indecisiveness of the Palestinian government, which he describes as driven by irrational conduct and blinded rage.

Stressing the weight the US holds in the Middle East peacemaking equation as a financial and military force, Hanania suggests that President Abbas "should recognize that the battle is not in the Gaza Strip but in the mind-set of the American public, where the future of Palestine, two states and Middle East peace will be decided." He encouraged the Palestinian president to engage the American public directly, especially at a time when he has a "friend at the White House."

Engaging the American public seemed to be a priority on the Palestinian President's agenda when he visited President Obama on June 9th, in advance of Netanyahu's visit. "The most important aspect of the Palestinian visit was the striking demonstration of Palestinian forthcomingness on peace, especially from Abbas personally," writes Hussein Ibish for The American Task Force on Palestine.

While Abbas's visit coincided with the devastating flotilla attack, the president firmly pointed out that while the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) denounced Israel's offensive actions, refusing to continue the diplomacy talks would pointlessly damage the Palestinian national interests.

Presenting themselves as a real diplomatic and political partner in peace to the US administration, the Palestinians demonstrated a constructive position in relation to direct peace talks with Israel. They agreed to resume direct negotiations once the US establishes a more "diplomatic and political groundwork" for the proximity talks with the Israeli government regarding basic borders and security issues. In another successful public diplomacy attempts during the visit, President

Abbas had an unprecedented dinner with 30 key Jewish American leaders, answering questions and reflecting on Jewish and Palestinian historic ties. Abbas also attended to questions at a discussion at The Brookings Institute, moderated by Martin Indyk, the Brookings' Vice President.

Indyk notes in an article for The Washington Post that Abbas's outreach to the Obama administration and Netanyahu's halt on housing in the West bank have helped "create the most conducive environment for peace negotiations since the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000."

While the Arab League has formerly endorsed proximity talks with Israel, Indyk warns that both parties have less than four months to make progress on borders and security issues and to begin direct negotiations. Otherwise, Netanyahu will come under heavy pressure to unfreeze settlement activity, and the Arab League mandate will be withdrawn.

As the international community is busy at work trying to make these talks possible, Caroline Glick at The Jerusalem Post sheds the light on the nature of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict from a media perspective. She claims that the peace process is affected by some media ideologies which promote a deeply distorted image of the Middle East reality and Israel's alliance with the US.

Aware of the power of media in setting the record right, Jennifer Laszlo Mizrahi, the founder and president of The Israel Project, announced that the Washington-based pro-Israeli non-profit organization had undergone "a paradigm shift" after concluding that current peace efforts were not working, writes Gary Rosenblatt for The Jewish Week.

The primary change was the decision to reach out more aggressively to the thousands of reporters in the Arabic language media "to try to level the playing field to make peace possible."

Consequently, the newly appointed senior adviser of the organization's Arabic Media Project, Adil Awadh, has been reaching out and meetings with Arab journalists to encourage them to report Israel's side of the Mideast conflict.

While the Iraqi-born Muslim acknowledged that his work represents "a very dangerous game," Awadh felt "the friction and adversity" during his first attempts to engage Arab journalists at the United Nations "was beneficial."

"They [the Arab media] don't show the dynamic of Israel as a democratic society," said Awadh. "They just want to fixate on the image in the Arab mind that Israel is a vampire, seeking to steal Arab blood and land." However, "demonizing Jews was counterproductive to any peace process," he maintained.

Awadh believes that he was able to point out to journalists, as an Arab who favors a Palestinian state, that Israel is a reality and that the common objective should be peace. "The only solution is information and education," he said.

Regardless of the skepticism surrounding their effort of spreading positive information about Israel through Arab journalists, Mizrahi noted that some headway has been made.

According to a polling funded by The Israel Project in Egypt, Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza, findings indicate that it is possible to influence perceptions of Israel by presenting certain facts, even when the Arab world still maintains a negative, one-dimensional view of Israel.

"Nearly 60 percent of the Arab public say they become 'more favorable' towards Israel after they learn about Israel's willingness to pursue peace and Israel's acceptance of all religious groups, including Muslims," according to the organization, which insists that many Arab media outlets are willing to interview and quote Israeli officials and experts.

No Justice for the Media

Media figures gathered to discuss the role of media in Arab society at the Arab Media Leaders Forum, reports Nabil Abu Shal at Al-Masry Al-Youm.

The second meeting took place at Egypt's Bibliotheca Alexandrina (BA). BA Director Ismael Serag Eddin called for the

Arab world to catch up with societies that are taking advantage of technology and media development. He pointed out that the Arab world is "technology-consuming" rather than "knowledge-producing."

Forum participants also discussed the relationship between the state and the media. Galal Dwidar, the Secretary General for Egypt's Supreme Council of Journalism, maintained that the relationship requires mutual respect and a guarantee for the media's freedom of expression. The head of the Dar al-Helal publishing house suggested legalizing the freedom of media access and training media workers. Other participants suggested forming independent councils to manage government media outlets.

"In the last few years there has been some confusion [over] issues of freedom of expression."

Wadab Khanfar, Director General of Al-Jazeera

At the site of the Arab Media Leaders Forum meeting, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and his son Gamal Mubarak spoke out against a blogger's killing, reports Amro Hassan at the LA Times Babylon and Beyond blog. 28-year-old Khaled Saied was allegedly beaten to death by two officers in Alexandria. After protests in Cairo and Alexandria and a rebuke from Amnesty International, Mahmoud Salah and Awad Ismail Suleiman were charged with illegal arrest and using torture and brutality.

"Justice must take its course, and this applies to the case of the death of Egyptian citizen Khaled Saied in Alexandria, especially after the prosecutor general referred the accused to court," said Mubarak. "The party insists on the accountability of any wrongdoer within the framework of justice, transparency and the rule of the law." Mubarak's

words come as a surprise as the Egyptian government has generally repressed the press through the emergency law.

Hala Mustafa, a member of Egypt's National Democratic Party, told Reuters that Mubarak's words represented a turning point in the relationship between the state and the media. "The statement, which is the first of its kind, signals that mounting pressure and political awareness in Egypt have reached a new level capable of pushing the political reform process forward," he commented.

Despite the events of the conference and Mubarak's call for justice, media experts are generally pessimistic about the state of the media and free expression in the Middle East, reports Arabian Business. "Unfortunately during the last four to five years the opposite [of improvement] has happened," lamented Wadah Khanfar, Al-Jazeera's Director General. Post-GWOT, he pointed out, "Arab governments started going back and coming up with new regulations and laws."

The Al-Jazeera network has been criticized by Arab governments. In fact, Bahraini authorities banned the Qatar-based Arab news channel for "flouting" press laws in the Gulf state. Other media outlets, reporters and commentators have been repressed and imprisoned by government officials. According to Freedom House's 2009 media study, none of the countries in the Middle East ranked as having a "free press." The report additionally concluded that 79 percent of the fifteen Middle Eastern countries were "not free" in terms of press freedom.

"In the last few years there has been confusion [over] issues of freedom of expression," Khanfar continued. "As long as our governments are not convinced that free media could help in developing society and as long as they see us [as] potential recruits for their propaganda, and as long as there are journalists around who will seek grants from governments to act on their behalf and to deceive and to dis-inform, I think we are going to have a problem," the Al-Jazeera director general concluded.

The case of Tunisian journalist Fahem Boukadous has also attracted international attention. According to Amnesty International, Boukadous was found guilty of "belonging to a criminal association, taking part in a group

established to prepare or commit an attack against people or property and spreading information liable to disrupt public order" as a result of his coverage of protests against unemployment and rising living costs in Gafsa.

The journalist is currently in the hospital, suffering from a severe asthmatic condition. "In the coming few hours, the police might come and take me out of the hospital. I am an opinion holder and a defender of rights. I am not scared of the arrest and the prison. What concerns me is my deteriorating health," he told Amnesty International.

The organization claimed that Boukadous's trial was a travesty. Boukadous was too ill to attend his appeal, and his defense lawyer was not permitted to make a statement to the court. "The defense lawyers were hindered at every step, denied the right to call and cross-examine witnesses and in some cases prevented from even addressing the court. The Tunisian courts have piled injustice upon injustice," asserted Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Program.

"This is not a battle for freedom, it is a battle for his life," added the journalist's lawyer. Amnesty International and the Tunisian journalist's defense team are worried that his imprisonment will have a severe impact on his health, especially if he does not have good medical care in prison.

"Tuesday's session before the Gafsa Court of Appeals was the judicial gloss over an injustice. Tunisians yet again received a chilling warning that if they speak out or simply report independently from the government line, they face serious consequences," concluded Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

Al-Waleed and Murdoch Take on the Middle East

Prince Al-Waleed Bin Talal's Kingdom Holding Company recently announced that it will launch an Arabic-language news channel in partnership with the Fox News Network, reports The Canadian Press.

According to Ben Flanagan at The National, Prince Al-Waleed, through a Kingdom Holding press statement, spoke of the news channel as an "addition and an alternative for viewers" in the Middle East. "[It] will focus on development in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world on the political, economic and social fronts," he continued.

"[The new channel] will focus on development in Saudi Arabia and the Arab world on the political, economic and social fronts."

Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal, owner of the Rotana Media Group

Al-Waleed's news channel will be competing with Arab-language news channels like Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. In addition to Arab news channels, the Prince's project will have to contend with popular international news channels like Rusiya Al-Youm and BBC Arabic.

The news channel will be launched in partnership with Fox, a significant part of Rupert Murdoch's media empire. Both Murdoch and Prince Al-Waleed Bin Talal have holdings in their companies. Prince Al-Waleed has a 7 percent stake in Murdoch's News Corp, while News Corp recently paid 70 million dollars for a 9.09 per cent stake in the Rotana Media Group. Previously, Rotana and Fox International channels signed a four-year agreement with the Walt Disney Company in December 2009, bringing Disney content to the region.

In another article in The National, Ben Flanagan reports that News Corp did not confirm the extent of Fox's involvement in the news channel. However, Prince Al-Waleed maintained

that the news channel would follow the “business model” of Murdoch’s Fox News and Sky News channels.

Flanagan observes that “unanswered questions about the ownership and political sway of the new channel will also have a bearing on its commercial success.” He adds that an association with the US Fox News Channel, which has the reputation of a right-wing bias, “would be unlikely to prove popular in [the Middle East] region.”

Some Arab media figures are concerned about the news channel’s editorial stance. “I’m a little surprised that [the association is with] Fox ... what will be the level of editorial interference? That would be my primary concern,” questioned Tariq Qureishy, a Dubai-based independent media consultant.

However, Steven Hall, chief executive of CNBC Arabiya, welcomes the addition of Arabic-language news channels. “The major players have been in the business for some time and have established a connection with their audiences, but a plurality and diversity of voices is a healthy thing and should be encouraged,” he maintained.

Another controversial aspect of Prince Al-Waleed Bin-Talal’s announcement was the person he chose to appoint as chief of the news channel, Jamal Khashoggi. Khashoggi, former editor-in-chief of Saudi Arabia’s Al-Watan, was forced to resign after a conflict with the newspaper.

Saudi poet Ibrahim al-Almaee wrote an article questioning aspects of Salafism, the branch of Islam dictating Saudi Arabia’s governance. Although the article was published while Khashoggi was abroad, the scandal, coupled with the editor’s previous clashes with the authorities, led to his resignation. Although the former editor did not agree with the article about Islam, he had previously questioned the government’s stance on issues like women’s rights and the religious police.

Despite some questions surrounding the news channel’s political and ideological leanings, Al-Waleed remained confident that the news channel will have a niche in the Arab world. However, he did not announce when the network would begin broadcasting.

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