

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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Winning Hearts and Minds in AfPak?

The Pakistani army recently announced to the Obama administration that no new military offensive against Al-Qaeda would be occurring in the country for at least the next six months, reports NPR. The US interprets this statement as another sign of Pakistan's alleged reluctance to take on extremist groups.

The announcement came as Defense Secretary Robert Gates made a visit to Islamabad for talks aimed at cementing the relationship and pushing Pakistan to expand its military campaign, remarks the news site. The Pakistani army Maj. Gen. Athar Abbas argued that the underlying reason for this decision was that the Pakistani army would need six months to a year to consolidate gains and regroup before it can launch any new operations.

Acknowledging that part of the problem in Pakistani-US operations lies in trust building measures between both countries, Gates noted, "We have to do this in a way that is comfortable for them, and at a pace that they can accommodate and is tolerable for them."

While the tone was cordial during Gates' visit, notes NPR, the questions denote suspicion regarding US motives in Pakistan. Gates said he would address each concern, one by one. "And I can keep going," he added, "because we're aware of these conspiracy theories as much as anyone — and they're all nonsense."

Gates expressed his concerns however that "an organized propaganda campaign" was under way to taint Pakistani people's perceptions of the United States, while assuring Pakistan that ties between the two nations were based on "common interests and mutual respect," according to Earth Times.

Many Pakistanis regard US presence in

the region as being part of a hegemonic design to occupy both Afghanistan and Pakistan and take control of the strategic assets of the world's sole Muslim nuclear power - Pakistan.

"Pakistan is a sovereign country, and it is up to Pakistan when and where to launch an operation," the defense secretary told reporters in Islamabad. Pakistan is under growing pressure to expand an ongoing offensive in the South Waziristan tribal district adjacent to North Waziristan-- a stronghold of militants associated with the insurgent group known as the Haqqani network.

Earth Times comments that the US stepped up missile strikes on militant hideouts in Pakistan's tribal areas in recent months, while Pakistan publicly opposes the US drone attacks, complaining that they violate its territorial sovereignty and fuel support for the militants.

Gates continued his public diplomacy tour with an address to Pakistani military officers, to whom he declared his hope of forging an "even closer" relationship with Pakistan. "I just think it's useful to open a dialogue," he said.

Likewise, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently unveiled a long-term, non-military strategy to stabilize Afghanistan and Pakistan, reports DNA. Her strategy involves bringing militants back to mainstream society, improving governance and transparency, and rebuilding the farming sector in the war-torn nation.

The news site points out that Washington is hoping to turn relations with Kabul and Islamabad into a long-haul partnership by supporting democratic elements and stepping up economic reforms.

"While our military mission in Afghanistan is not open-ended, we are committed to building lasting partnerships in Afghanistan and Pakistan," Clinton said in a statement timed with the release of the strategy.

Secretary of State Clinton reiterated the US's long-term engagement with Pakistan to help its people overcome development challenges while identifying wide-ranging areas of cooperation toward stability of the country, reports Brunei News.

Referring to the Kerry-Lugar bill, she added that Pakistan's democratic transition and widespread public backing for Pakistan's military operations against militants offer a great opportunity. Among the various aid the US will provide Pakistan, it "will also expand its public diplomacy effort to build increased people-to-people contacts, convey American policies effectively, and challenge the extremists' narrative," stated the news site.

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However, the Taliban are also working on how they relate to local population, hoping to win the hearts and mind as they are currently overhauling their image to gain new allies while countering America's campaign in the region, reports The New York Times. The Taliban are resorting to sophisticated, new and traditional, media tools, are recasting themselves increasingly as a local liberation movement, as they are seeking to muster local popular support.

The Taliban's spiritual leader, Mullah Muhammad Omar, issued a lengthy directive late last spring outlining a new code of conduct for the Taliban, which among other things bans suicide bombing against civilians, cutting off ears and burning down schools. They also seem to try to distance themselves from Al-Qaeda.

The New York Times remarks that they are "capitalizing on the mounting frustration of Afghans with their own government and the presence of foreign troops." The Taliban's public relations operation is also increasingly efficient at putting out its message and often works faster than NATO's.

"The Afghan adaptation to counterinsurgency makes them much more dangerous," said a senior NATO intelligence official. "Their overarching goals probably haven't changed much since 2001, but when we arrived with a new counterinsurgency strategy, they responded with one of their own."

"The reason they changed their tactics is that they want to prepare for a long-term fight, and for that they need support from the people; they need local sources of income," commented Wahid Mujda, a former Taliban official who now tracks the insurgency on the Internet and frequently comments on Afghan television.

"People have no choices; they are in a dilemma," said Abdul Rahman, a tribal elder and businessman in Kandahar. "In places where the Taliban are active, the people are compelled to support them, they are afraid of the Taliban. And, in those places where government has a presence, the people are supporting the government," he said.

However, the Taliban is far from winning. According to a recent Defense Intelligence Agency survey, the Taliban's

new strategy has failed to win over Afghans, and even though the insurgency may be carrying out fewer mutilations and beheadings, it still relies on intimidation through night letters, threatening conversations and assassinations.

"We still have no idea of how Obama hopes to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict."

Rami Khouri, the Daily Star.

The latest rhetoric from Taliban commanders is that the current insurgency is motivated by the Pashtuns of Afghanistan, who the Taliban claim are persecuted by the Afghan government. While Pashtuns have been disproportionately affected by the Western military offensive, the insurgency is predominantly active in Pashtun areas, where it is difficult to separate civilians and fighters. "At the moment, the dueling propaganda wars seem to have reached a stalemate," concludes The New York Times.

Obama and the New America

After twelve months in office, President Barack Obama faces strong criticism at home for his policies in the Middle East and other key US strategic areas, although he remains widely popular abroad, reports The Telegraph. As early as October, his approval ratings had tumbled from 65-70 per cent to the high 40s.

The British newspaper remarks that when he took office, the president was already facing unprecedented challenges stemming from the legacy of the previous administration. He also added to his load the sticky issue of reforming healthcare, while tackling "energy reform, sign a global green treaty, embrace the Muslim

world, bring peace to the Middle East, establish a universe free of nuclear weapons and talk sense to the Iranians."

The American people are starting to feel that the young president may have taken on too much and consequently lost the ability to inspire people, while being regarded as too soft abroad.

As American popularity is claimed, American credibility continues to decline. There is no campaign to rally a grand alignment of the forces opposing Islamism and some start to wonder if foreign policy may contribute to the early downfall of the president and his team. The Telegraph questions if the administration's mistakes "will eventually inflict enormous damage unless it either changes its ways or is voted out of office."

The news site remarks, "Critics have lambasted his foreign policy for appeasing terrorists...changing the tone in the Middle East conflict was clumsily done but could still bring results."

Rami Khouri argues for The Daily Star that Obama's performance in the Middle East has been disappointing so far, especially when it comes to the Arab-Israeli conflict that "remains the central destabilizing factor in the wider region."

Khouri remarks that the US president is not to blame for the current stalemate in the region, but rather should be praised for his new activism, ideas and advances in Arab-Israeli diplomacy, although most of them "fizzled out."

"If Obama gets a B for effort and a D for achievement, Arabs and Israelis probably deserve an F for their collective failure to contribute meaningfully to resolving their own conflict," he asserts.

Khouri comments, "We still have no idea of how Obama hopes to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict, particularly the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, because he has not articulated the US view on core issues like refugees, the ultimate status of the settlements, and Jerusalem."

The total absence of serious Arab diplomacy or initiatives is one of the profound shortcomings of the contemporary Arab political system, claims the author before further commenting that these regimes are largely

immobilized on the international scene because of their near total preoccupation with maintaining power at home.

A year after the start of the era of Barack Obama, Khouri argues, “The Americans still come and go and speak of their dreams for the Middle East, the Israelis still act like criminals, and the Arabs insist on remaining invisible.”

Aaron David Miller explains in *The Los Angeles Times* that Obama has acted as an energizer of American foreign policy and diplomacy, but “to millions of Americans without jobs, and millions more worried about debt, foreclosure and deficits, none of this diplomacy means much.”

“Countries or individuals that engage in cyber attacks should face consequences and international condemnation.”

Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State.

Miller identifies a problem that is inherent to the American system. He notes that a president who wants to be transformational is trapped in a dysfunctional political system of oppositional Republicans, unruly Democrats and overly grandiose goals of his own making.

“A year in, Obama may well be coming to realize that while politics is about what people want, governance is about what they get,” says Miller who believes that it may be a positive thing in the long-term.

Charles M. Sennott comments for *Global Post* that Obama’s public diplomacy is strong, but he forecasts that to carry out the hard work of affecting change he still has a long way to go.

Obama’s TV presence may have been a characteristic attribute of his first

year that may have earned him his popularity as well, points out WLWT. The president kicked off his 2009 TV appearances by focusing on the perceived US standing in the Middle East by speaking with the Dubai-based television network Al-Arabiya in late January.

In what was his first formal interview since taking office, the president defined how the US would change its approach within the region, based on a campaign of mutual respect, but reiterated the continued need to dismantle and eliminate terrorist organizations.

While remaining critical of the president, the news site suggests that it is a platform that may have helped him win the Nobel Peace Prize later that year, becoming only the fourth US president to be honored with the prestigious award.

Throughout the year, Obama diligently pushed his agenda on public television, reaching as many as possible.

The news site remarks, “Perhaps Barack the basketball-loving family man is tempered by Obama the politically skilled president, and that is why he has shown no fear of becoming overexposed in the media,” adding, “However, one thing seems certain: If 2009 was any indication, 2010 promises to be a year of many more prime-time firsts for the Obama TV juggernaut.”

The *Telegraph* also points out the role the media played in the first year of Obama, remarking that after having swooned for him in the campaign, the media has overcorrected its earlier collective abandonment of balanced reporting. The most important step in the coming year will be to win over the Americans that were lost, by having the president appreciate that “their relationship isn’t about him, it is about them.”

Internet Censorship

A recently launched US State Department campaign aimed at supporting global internet freedom has provided a new framework for renewed discussions among analysts and commentators.

“Countries or individuals that engage in cyber attacks should face consequences

and international condemnation,” said Secretary of State Hilary Clinton, according to the *Wall Street Journal*. Clinton went on to specifically name China, Tunisia, Uzbekistan, Vietnam and Egypt as countries where “a new information curtain is descending.”

Although the editorial in the *Wall Street Journal* goes on to express support for Secretary Clinton’s initiative, the article does not address the specifics of the plan. Marc Lynch, however, takes a more analytical approach to the anti-censorship strategy.

“There didn’t seem to be much there by way of actual policy initiatives,” Lynch writes in his blog for *Foreign Policy*. He goes on to emphasize that much of the world may interpret Clinton’s statements as thinly veiled rhetoric “calling on the US to use the soft power of the internet to promote regime change in Iran.”

“The end of propaganda seems to represent the end of the world as we know it.”

Florin Flueras, Post Spectacle.

Lynch cites a recent opinion piece by former Under Secretary of State James Glassman and international policy expert Michael Doran, in which they advocate directly supporting the anti-government movement in Iran over the internet.

“The problem for Glassman and Doran is that when they talk this way, it makes [soft power] less likely to work...and opens up a whole basket of moral hazard issues,” Lynch explains.

Lynch also points out that Secretary Clinton failed to mention nations with which the US has strong diplomatic ties, but are nevertheless engaging in online censorship, such as Jordan.

Indeed, the *Global Voices* blog highlights some reactions over the recent decision

by the Jordanian Cession Court to subject Jordanian websites to the Press and Publication Law, which puts the same restrictions on the Jordanian web as already exist in its traditional media.

“The general feel in the Jordanian blogosphere seems to be one of defiance. Several bloggers are pushing for an active challenging of the court rule,” Global Voices writes. They highlight one angered blogger who says, “This is a golden opportunity for us all to fight together for a decent life. Let us make our voices heard for the whole world, and preferably in Arabic so we could be taken seriously for once.”

Secretary Clinton’s speech was immediately prompted by the recent dispute between China and Google, who has “threatened to withdraw from the Chinese market” due to accused hack attempts against human rights activists in the country, says Charles Recknagel at Radio Free Europe.

Google may not, however, be as quick to take action against internet repression in the Middle East, claims David Shamah at the Jerusalem Post. “Google not only does not protest the censorship and invasive net practices of Arab governments— it even cooperates with them,” he writes.

The US government seems nonetheless intent on utilizing new media platforms to reach out to users in the Arab world. For example, the US Embassy in Baghdad has launched a Facebook fan page “with the aim of reaching out to Iraqis who want to learn more about American culture and society,” according to Gulf News. A spokesman for the embassy said the page will “spotlight American music, sports and holidays.”

Another endeavor to promote democratic online involvement comes with the Spirit Initiative, a website launched with the express goal of addressing the Arab-Israeli conflict, writes the Jerusalem Post.

The Spirit Initiative “seeks to apply the technical savvy of young thinkers to some of the world’s oldest and most destructive conflicts,” says the article. The site is not yet fully operational, and is run by a group of college student volunteers.

“We’re trying to minimize limitations and boundaries,” the project’s creator, Gal Bar Dea, told the Jerusalem Post.

“The whole notion is to allow the crowd to lead the way, to work together to create the building blocks for peace.”

Bar Dea may find a difficult customer in Saudi Arabia, where heavy censorship and morality laws make many users reticent to engage openly in discussions online. Asharq-Alawsat highlights one recent study which showed that among the few Saudi females online, most do not use their real names when posting content.

Whether or not the State Department’s new initiative is successful, many analysts are expressing a concern for a policy that could end up backfiring on the US. “It’s great to support and encourage internet activists and protesters of all sorts,” writes Marc Lynch.

“The question that is circulating is why would Murdoch want to invest in Arab films and music production?”

Iqbal Tamimi, Al-Arabiya.

“But such support can lead them to take some very risky, dangerous activities against their brutal governments, perhaps in the expectation that the United States will protect them... I hope [the State Department has] thought about these questions...before they raised the flag.”

Propaganda Wars

The Department of Defense recently issued a new publication, providing an update on the agency’s approach to “psychological operations,” (PSYOPS) but critics still wonder where the thin line that distinguishes between the objectives of psychological operations and the barriers of negative propaganda lies.

Steven Aftergood comments on the

latest developments in government secrecy and national security policy for Secrecy News, asserting that psychological operations are intended to foster stronger foreign attitudes and behaviors towards a certain country.

Aftergood continues that PSYOPS “convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals.”

However, the new DoD doctrine seems to be promoting a more negative definition of the term ‘propaganda.’ On his blog Attackerman, journalist Spencer Ackerman expresses some concern that the meaning of ‘propaganda,’ while originally intended to identify pro-government advertising, now appears to have changed to “something bad the other fellow does.”

Modern-day media is considered to play an active role in the development and spreading of negative propaganda. On his blog Mountain Runner, Matt Armstrong recalls a testimony by William Benton, the Assistant Secretary of State for Public Affairs under President Truman, to the House Foreign Affairs Committee in 1945.

Benton stated that “the United States Government cannot be indifferent to the ways in which our Nation is portrayed in other countries.” He also implied that more attention should be given to broadcasting and international transmission of news, as the news media can greatly influence foreign perceptions of the US.

Endorsing Benton’s comments, Armstrong emphasizes that ignoring the speed and the impact the movement of ideas in today’s information age can be a deadly mistake. He goes on to urge the Obama administration to make a serious and concerted effort in this matter, saying that “the spread of ideas has been democratized in the sense that anyone could create, capture, modify, and propagate information, but so too has the ability to disrupt and destroy.”

Other writers share similar views regarding the role of the media in shaping propaganda. According to the blog of the Irish Socialist Workers Party, the media should provide information that is beneficial for society. However,

the party's website acknowledges, "We live in a society where the media has become a weapon that is used by wealthy people to promote ideas that help them to keep control of society."

The Man Common blog highlights the recent US-led invasion of Iraq as an example of the mass media's proliferation of propaganda. Michelle Pulaski, an assistant professor at Pace University, said that there was a striking contrast between what Americans and European and pan-Arab audiences saw on the news. She indicated that "foreign news bureaus showed far more blood and gore than American stations."

Pulaski also pointed out that Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, a media watchdog organization, reported that opponents of the Iraq war were greatly underrepresented on television, with only ten percent of the news sources portraying views in opposition to the war.

"He is a very good speaker, but he hasn't lived up to expectations. Just addressing the topic is not enough."

Gulf News Commentator.

Although USA Today reports that psychologists noted that people respond far more readily to propaganda than they are willing to believe, Pulaski warned, "It is up to the individual media consumer to be critical in gathering news information on the war from a variety of sources," as networks engaged more frequently in "personalization and individualization" of broadcasted material.

The question of the 'thin line' between positive and negative propaganda remains unanswered. Florin Fluera declares, "The end of propaganda seems to represent the end of the world as we know it," in the blog Post Spectacle.

She claims that many political systems are

strongly based on propaganda. Fleuras suggests that we should lean towards a greater use of social media tools, such as Twitter and Facebook, to provide a more comprehensive democratic representation of reality, in order to dissipate the current propaganda frame of thinking.

A Small Step for Middle East Media, a Great Leap for Murdoch?

Saudi billionaire investor Prince Al-Waleed bin Talal held meetings this week with News Corp. Chairman and Chief Executive Rupert Murdoch to discuss investments, including Rotana Media, according to a statement from the prince's office, reports the Wall Street Journal.

The meetings "touched upon future potential alliance with News Corp," revealed the statement.

Rotana, which hosts News Corp.'s Fox channel in Saudi Arabia via its television network, owns rights to more than 2,000 Arabic movies and is the world's largest Arabic language music library, and also manages some of the Arab world's most popular artists. According to Ipsos MediaCT, Rotana ranks among the top-five channels for advertising revenue in Saudi, the Gulf's most populous Arab nation.

True Slant comments that the Kingdom is renowned for its lack of press freedom, while News Corp does not exactly enjoy a much better reputation, rather seen as a flagship against "multicultural dialogue or embracing Islamic culture."

Iqbal Tamimi for Al-Arabiya criticizes the move between the Prince and Murdoch, wondering why the partnership would take place with a person the Arabs perceive to be disrespectful of them, their faith, or heritage.

The interest is purely financial, posits True Slant, as the Middle East is home to 300 million Arabic speakers, 65% of whom constitute the coveted under-30 demographic. Young Arabs are voracious media consumers and Rotana

has a lock on the pop mass-market.

Tamimi concurs, "Western media is after Arab media platforms, or are they only after the deep Arab pockets? People in the Middle East are still in a state of shock after last week's Yahoo business venture of buying Maktoob.com, the only Arab internet portal based in Jordan."

Furthermore, ad spending in the region is predicted to grow at 20 times the rate of the North American market, which predicts considerable financial gain for the American media mogul.

The news shocked people across the Arab world, even though Rotana is an entertainment business and has a negligible role in the news activities. "The question that is circulating is why would Murdoch want to invest in Arab films and music production?" remarks the journalist.

The majority of Arabs expressed worries that Murdoch is interfering in the Middle Eastern media. Critics claim Arabs will not forget his right-wing politics or pro-Israeli stance, and how Fox News portrays Arabs and Muslims in a negative light.

Tamimi adds that Muslims and Arabs in the Middle East are disgusted with the way Murdoch's machine portrays them as "terrorists, extremists, and militants who are always linked with Al-Qaeda in every possible incident, and the fact that the Jewish people are always victims of anti-Semitism."

Al-Jazeera Creating Rifts in the Middle East?

Professor Peter Manning, who recently presented a lecture at Qatar University's Department of Mass Communication and Information Science, lauded Qatar-based Al-Jazeera its unique approach to international news coverage, reports The Peninsula. Manning praised the news network, calling it an 'outstanding example of changing the narrative.'

Manning noted that many news outlets in the Middle East publish reports on events and developments in their

region which originate from Western media sources. He added that Al-Jazeera should continue to resist pressure from outside sources to produce content more palatable to Western viewers.

However, the Qatari channel has been accused of spreading pro-Arab propaganda to compensate for the lack of communication from Israeli media to Arab audiences, according to a report established by State Comptroller Micha Lindenstrauss, reports Haaretz.

The Comptroller's Office stated that the present situation, in which the state makes little effort to engage the Arab media, is unacceptable, especially in situations of emergencies. Denouncing what he perceives as an anti-Israel bias in Arab news, he added that Israel's Arab population is exposed to a deliberate hate propaganda on Arab satellite television, "especially [from] Al-Jazeera and the Hamas and Hezbollah television channels."

"These audiences are completely exposed in the information front to persistent propaganda from Arabic outlets across the board," comments the Comptroller. The report recommended that Israel invests in training courses for Arabic spokespersons for various state information services in order to improve outreach to the Arab-Israeli sector of the population.

Al-Jazeera was also recently accused by the Jerusalem Post of taking a sympathetic stance towards Hamas, and of depicting Egyptians as taking part in a US-Israeli conspiracy to silence Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

The Jerusalem Post claims that in an attempt to embarrass the Egyptians and exert pressure on them to halt construction of their subterranean anti-smuggling barrier, Hamas has recently mobilized major media outlets in the Arab and Islamic world against the project.

The Jerusalem Post holds Al-Jazeera partly responsible for the growing tension between the Egyptians and Gaza. Allegedly, Al-Jazeera has dedicated many of its popular programs to live debates about the controversial wall to be built at the border between Gaza and Egypt, providing a free platform to almost anyone willing to condemn the Egyptian regime and President Hosni Mubarak.

The Jerusalem Post remarks that the controversy over the wall has even divided the most prominent scholars of the Islamic world, triggering a "war of fatwas" in favor of and against the project.

Muslims Still Waiting

As President Obama's first year in office comes to an end, the enthusiasm generated by his speech in Cairo has dampened considerably, according to Islam Online. While some are still appreciative of the President's friendly gesture, increasingly, Muslims in America and around the world are expressing concerns that his words have not been followed up with concrete policy changes.

"Military supervisors are not properly focused on the threat posed by self-radicalization and need to better understand the behavioral warning signs."

US Secretary of Defense Robert Gates.

One American Muslim housewife, identified only as Priscilla, comments to Islam Online, "I think President Obama's outreach to the Muslim communities across the world and in America has been very balanced. He has shown respect and conveyed America's respect for Muslims in his travels to Turkey and Cairo. His speech in Cairo was a monumental speech."

In a collection of readers' opinions on Gulf News, one woman expresses her disappointment regarding the

president's capacity to deliver on his commitments. "Obama has been treated more like a celebrity. He is a very good speaker, but he hasn't lived up to expectations. Just addressing the topic is not enough." The news site remarks that it seems to be a common complaint among Obama's detractors.

But Khalid Amayreh takes a more critical approach, writing in The New Nation that, "We must never be oblivious of the fact that the United States is nearly fully responsible for pushing young Muslims to fall into the abyss of violent radicalism."

Amayreh goes on to claim that "the enduring American embrace of the criminal Arab tyrannies from Morocco to Bahrain" is one of the major roadblocks to improved relations between the United States and the Muslim world.

Laura Rozen points out for Politico that the American government has a "more pressing agenda items with Middle East autocracies than promoting democracy." The revival of peace talks and the stabilization and development of the region is a priority.

In particular, the Obama administration is working closely with the Egyptian leadership to try to revive Israel Palestinian peace talks, notes Rozen. The democratization of Egypt and the promotion of human rights are "likely to remain mostly a second tier agenda item for the administration looking for reliable partners to help advance its Middle East peace vision," explains Rozen.

But Moe Al-Gamal, CEO at an American technology firm, is more critical of Muslims than of President Obama. At Islam Online he says, "I believe President Obama did well overall in reaching out to Muslims at home here in USA and all over the world. What has surprised me and made me unhappy is the absence of a loud response from Muslims, especially from what is called Islamic countries."

Al-Gamal goes on to say that he still hopes Arab countries "appreciate the President's outreach," and that Muslims will join Obama in opposing violence. "I know privately they said so but we need [it to be said] publicly and loudly," he asserts.

"I would want him to know that I was all for him. I believed in the

change he claimed to bring, so I want to see it," another American Muslim student told Islam Online.

"The first year was focused on building respect and mutual understanding...It will take more than a year to have more progress in the mutual relationship between America and the Muslim people across the world," Priscilla wrote to Islam Online.

"We need to work together for peace. We want to make sure all Americans know that Islam and Muslims condemn terrorism, extremism and violence," she concluded.

Redefining the Enemy

During his latest visit to Beirut, Senator John McCain faced opposition and criticism from Lebanese officials concerning a bill recently passed by Congress, reports Franklin Lamb at The People's Voice. Under the law, television stations airing anti-American incitements to violence will be banned within the United States.

"I believe some of the stations we prevented could have been stirring feelings of enmity to America and we have the right to stop them," announced Senator McCain after meeting the Lebanese president. "However, we have to consider the issue further to avoid taking similar decisions regarding stations which did not voice hostility against us," he added.

The bill generated negative responses throughout the Middle East, especially in Lebanon, where officials viewed it as yet another "terrorism list." Lebanese president Michel Suleiman discussed his disapproval of the bill with Senator McCain, while Speaker of Parliament Nabeh Berri sent a letter to US Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi.

Berri warned that the legislation "would be interpreted as hostile" and it "breaches the sovereignty of the states broadcasting the penalized satellite content." Berri also cautioned that the bill will further complicate the relationship between Lebanon and the United States.

Following several recent incidents,

US officials are attempting to address shortcomings in defense and national security policy in order to prevent further terrorist attacks. The bill was created as one of several initiatives to improve security and prevent extremist thought from infiltrating the mainstream.

While Secretary of Defense Robert Gates says that "military supervisors are not properly focused on the threat posed by self-radicalization and need to better understand the behavioral warning signs," experts chime in on measures that the Obama administration should take in order to defeat terrorism.

Some critics call for the administration to define the "enemy" more clearly, leading to effective profiling for potential threats within the United States. Others, like the World Defense Review columnist Walid Phares, expresses concern with the results of the Pentagon's review of the Fort Hood massacre which concludes that "US personnel is indeed being infiltrated and recruited by foreign jihadists."

Phares asserts that the conclusions of the report indicate that the US military and intelligence agencies lack the capability of detecting radicalization. This weakness, he argues, is due to a crucial mistake committed by both the Bush and Obama administrations.

He believes that both presidents avoided defining a doctrine for fear of "theological entanglement" and "meddling with a religion." Phares claims that the idea of the jihadist narrative is not as much about extremist religious views as it is about ideology.

The US is unable to detect radicalization because it has not articulated the aspects of the jihadist ideology clearly, he declares. Phares argues that looking for ideology would "detect the threat, without venturing in inextricable religious debates or unnecessarily apologizing for one or other particular faith."

On a similar note, William Fankboner reports in the FrontPage Magazine that defining the ideology surrounding terrorism may lead to discarding various myths of the 'stereotypical terrorist.' He continues, "Many Westerners are confused by the willingness of university-educated middle-class Muslims to perpetrate barbarous acts of terrorism."

In Fankboner's opinion, members of the educated class, which suffer humiliation due to exclusion from both societies, are "ideal recruits for self-annihilating acts of terrorism." He suggests that education in Western universities may be a trigger for extremist thought. "The common strand running through the backgrounds of middle-class jihadists is prolonged and close interaction with Western society, a clue...that is too often overlooked in the search for esoteric causation," he posits.

Fankboner concludes that while the common stereotype of a terrorist is someone from a poor, rural community in search of economic benefits, Americans should not be shocked at the prospect of terrorist recruits coming from the educated middle class.

Although the analysis may differ among experts, there seems to be a general consensus that the Obama administration needs to take its efforts to the next level. Walid Phares believes that the Pentagon's report calls for sweeping changes, including discarding the expertise over the past eight years. He asserts, "This warrants the reevaluation of the conflict and re-upgrading it to a state of war, even though it would still need to be determined 'with whom.'"

Iran and America: An Unlikely Alliance?

Last December, hundreds of thousands of Iranians protested in support of the current regime in Tehran, reports the China's national news outlet Xinhua. The pro-regime protesters condemned the anti-regime protests, which they described as "plots against the territorial integrity, national interests, and the Islamic Republic."

Despite Iran's front of "high level stability," within the country, some think that the nature of the American-Iranian relationship may evolve due to pro-democracy forces within the country. Journalist and historian Stephen Kinzer argues that Iran is an ideal ally for the United States, reports Tirdad

Derakhshani at The Philadelphia Inquirer,

Kinzer, author of "All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror," believes that Iran's pro-democracy movement will foster a new, more open regime in the Islamic Republic. "The government has lost a lot of legitimacy over the past few months," Kinzer pointed out, referring to the accusations of corruption in the 2009 presidential elections.

Kinzer continued that Iran has two points of similarity with the United States: "We have long-term strategic interests in common. Second, our societies have a strong democratic flavor." He added that like the United States, Iran is eager to curb Russian influence and power and "has a deep-seated enmity toward radical Sunni movements like the Taliban."

However, what Kinzer views as a perfect ally, others may view as a dangerous threat. "It is Iran, a supporter of terrorism now developing the capacity to fire nuclear-tipped missiles, that may pose the greatest threat to global stability and American security," writes James K. Glassman and Michael Doran for The Wall Street Journal.

Although Glassman and Doran do not propose an alliance with the Islamic Republic, they believe that a "new, less bellicose government taking power in Tehran" will be a realistic way to deal with the threat. They maintain that the United States should support the opposition in Iran.

"Everything that we do, everything that we say -- and everything that we don't do and don't say -- should be coordinated to meet this goal."

Some characteristics of the opposition are already working in favor of the United States. Stephen Kinzer observes that "Iran is the only country in the Muslim Middle East, perhaps the only Muslim country in the world, where the majority of people are pro-American."

Glassman and Doran also believe that the United States can capitalize on the democratic, pro-American environment by supporting the Green Revolution. "Third parties, rather than the US government, should play the main role," they suggest.

Kinzer is in agreement; he believes that

democracy can bloom in Iran as long as the "US can resist the temptation to intervene and allow events to take their own course."

However, Glassman and Doran advocate US involvement when it comes to technology, communication, and the media. They call for increased funding for Radio Farda and Voice of America satellite TV. They believe that the ultimate message from media involvement should tell Iranians, "Your regime, not the West, wants to keep you down."

"Picking up the phone is sure to interrupt the verse and this is disrespectful to the holy book."

Grand Mufti of Egypt.

Despite the optimism, tension continues between the United States and the Iranian government. Last Tuesday, Iran's Defense Minister Ahmad Vahidi issued a statement directed to the adversaries of the Islamic Republic, reports the Tehran Times. He warned that if Iran was attacked, it would take all necessary measures to protect its country, including "targeting foreign warships in the Persian Gulf."

In spite of US frustration with Iran's lack of cooperation over its nuclear program, Mohammad Akef Jamal at Gulf News argues that a war is unlikely. "The chances of [the US] resorting to military action against Iran seem unlikely, especially since the unstable Middle East would not welcome a new war," he writes. Pointing out the importance of oil to Iran's economy, Jamal believes that the United States will continue imposing sanctions on Iran.

Although the future of the US-Iranian relations remains a mystery, Americans continue to support the Iranian citizens' push for democracy. "The Iranian challenge appears more amenable than any other serious national threat to a

soft-power solution. Let's get going," urge James Glassman and Michael Doran.

Ringtones and Fatwas

Israel's blockade of Gaza, has restricted imports to the enclave and crushed traditional exports, and forced Palestinian entrepreneurs to turn to the internet in hopes of gaining access to new foreign markets through selling personalized cell phone ringtones, reports Reuters.

Haitham Abu Shaaban of Tatweer Business Services, working with a local recording studio, recently obtained a new contract with Dubai Telecoms Company "du" to sell his ringtones to the rest of the Arab world.

Waiting to finalize the deal in a few weeks, he will further develop an existing business in Gaza that provides customers with tailor-made musical jingles for their phones by creating a wider customer base throughout the Middle East.

Israel withdrew troops and settlers from Gaza in 2005 after 38 years of occupation. An economic blockade imposed on borders with both Israel and Egypt has crippled Gaza's economy and has been tightened since Hamas Islamists seized control in 2007.

"The fact that Gaza has been under siege has stopped us from developing exports. But we thought there was a way around this," said Abu Shaaban, who has partnered with Mashareq Studios in the deal with the Dubai Telecoms Company. The news site also reports that Gaza singers are lining up at the studios to record ringtone songs in a variety of styles, ranging from rap to jazz.

Abu Shaaban and Mashareq are banking on bigger revenues by offering du's 3 million subscribers a completely personalized service at higher rates, where singers would work customers' full names and special messages and wordings into one-off jingles.

The entrepreneurs are reluctant to put forecasts on earnings but among special features of the Gaza output is the ability to sing in not just a variety of musical styles but in the very wide variety of Arab

dialects, from North Africa to the Gulf.

The Internet has made exporting services from Gaza possible. "Gaza has its own excellent potential talent," Abu Shaaban said. "Through our work Arab clients have acknowledged that."

In related news, religious ringtones may also trigger the wrath of Muslim clerics who believe that verses of the Quran used as ringtones will "trivialize the word of God," reports All Things Digital.

In response to a growing trend of using verses from the Quran or the prayer call for ringtones among Muslim cell phone owners, the Grand Mufti of Egypt and the country's highest religious legal authority Ali Gomaa said that the practice "violates the sanctity of the divine words."

Citing his concern that the ringtone may confuse people by making them believe it is prayer time, the Mufti added in a fatwa he issued for this particular instance, "Picking up the phone is sure to interrupt the verse and this is disrespectful to the holy book." Instead, cell phone users might replace the ringtones with other religious songs.

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