

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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The Propaganda Battlefield

As NATO-Afghan led operations are underway in Afghanistan, propaganda remains at the forefront of the fight between the Taliban and the US, reports AOL News. Following US forces air strikes, which destroyed a house and killed civilians, Afghan sources claimed Taliban militants were using civilians as human shields- a claim that the Taliban refuted immediately.

“This is propaganda to cover up the civilian deaths caused by the invaders,” said Habibullah, a Taliban commander. Speaking over the telephone from an undisclosed location in Kandahar province, east of Helmand, he continued, “These people are our people; they are our brothers and sisters. Why would we put our own kin in danger?”

As the truth remains uncertain, such exchanges of accusations between the Taliban and the US will indubitably continue. According to AOL News, Habibullah added that the civilian presence is the key to the Taliban’s strategy but put a different spin on why noncombatants have remained in the area. “Everyone here supports the Taliban,” he claimed. “They are happy to be martyrs for our cause.”

The news site remarks that indeed, much of the insurgency in this part of Afghanistan is actually homegrown, denoting the population’s adherence to the Taliban’s rhetoric. In order to win the trust of the locals, the US and NATO must convince the locals that they will stick around and enforce peace in the region.

On the other hand, AOL News speculates that the Taliban will likely be prolonging the battle for hearts and minds, turning the deaths of innocents into a rallying cry against foreign aggression. Adnan R. Khan concludes, “In this case, as in so many other guerilla wars, the propagandist wins.

Diplomatic correspondent Jonathan Marcus for BBC News remarks that it is precisely this propaganda that shapes the battlefield where “information has become the new front line.” Aware that perception is pivotal in this war, the Pentagon and NATO have been devising a strategic communication plan to reach out to local populations.

Marcus illustrates his point with the example of the current operation in Helmand, broadcast widely in advance and named “Operation Moshtarak,” which in Dari translates as “together,” stressing the idea of partnership in an attempt to muster the population’s support.

However, the new discipline of strategic communications seeks to go beyond information operations, press briefings and leaflet drops. In the words of one alliance official, it is “an over-arching concept that seeks to put information at the very centre of policy planning.”

Marcus remarks that this growing centrality of information and the need to shape perceptions inevitably prompts critics to suggest that this may be no more than an exercise of propaganda. “In strategic communications, the messages you are sending must fit the facts on the ground,” countered Michael Clarke, director of the Royal United Services Institute in London. “The discipline is about bringing perceptions and reality together to achieve an effect.”

Integrated into its counterinsurgency strategy, NATO relies heavily on “advertising” according to the Wall Street Journal. In the current Marjah offensive led by the US and NATO, the military clearing can only succeed if the Afghan government can follow it with “hold and build” operations that maintain the loyalty of the population.

Patricia Lee Sharpe argues for Whirled Views that in general, winning the hearts and minds is a fallacy and “near impossible,” mainly due to the image of US

today. She remarks that public diplomacy is increasingly transformed into a different apparatus, where the lines between strategic communication propaganda and public diplomacy are blurred.

According to Sharpe, the military propaganda “has been brought to bear on the American people as well.” Consequently, she deplores that the US is faced with misinformed and frightened people who agree “that the insatiable military budget is indeed untouchable, except to be increased, and thus ensuring that an America that once gave heart to the world is less and less possible.”

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Israel's Re-branding Conundrum

Israel's recently announced decision to mount a massive international public relations campaign has prompted a flood of reactions and opinions from across the ideological spectrum, reports the New York Times. The initiative will engage Israeli citizens as traveling spokesmen on behalf of the Jewish state.

The Information and Diaspora Affairs Ministry is distributing pamphlets to Israelis traveling abroad and sponsoring classes to instruct people on how to present their country in a more positive light. The literature and courses emphasize promoting Israel as a sophisticated and technologically advanced society whose national policies "are not the source of regional conflict," the article continues.

"To counter the big money invested by Arab states in propaganda against Israel, we have to mobilize our human capital, meaning the residents of Israel," the minister of information told the New York Times.

However, the campaign has raised alarm bells for many who are familiar with the Jewish state and its related regional issues, although they would concede Israel does have a genuine problem with international perception.

"I think it is puerile," political science professor Shlomo Avineri of Hebrew University in Jerusalem told the New York Times. "Some of the information is ridiculous, and behind it I find a Bolshevik mentality... There is never any intimation that some of our problems have to do with actual policies."

At the annual Israel Tourism Conference in Tel Aviv, Ido Aharoni, the head of the Israeli Foreign Ministry's brand management team, commented that although there is widespread global support for Israel's right to exist, there are few foreigners who view the country as anything less than a nation in constant conflict, according to the Jerusalem Post.

"Political support doesn't translate into consumer affinity... In the modern age it is no less important to be attractive than it is to be in the right," Aharoni said.

The initiative was partially motivated by a recent report by the Reut Institute, a Tel Aviv think tank. The report indicated that "Israel's legitimacy is being attacked by a variety of individuals [in the West]," according to an Arab News article.

"In strategic communications, the messages you are sending must fit the facts on the ground."

Michael Clarke, Director of Royal United Services Institute in London.

The announcement of the PR campaign also comes on the heels of an international uproar over the murder of Hamas member Mahmoud Al-Mabhouh in Dubai, which many detractors are eager to tie to the Mossad, Israel's national intelligence agency.

Israel will continue to lose substantial support from Europeans if it is true that the Mossad used European passports to enter Dubai before the assassination, writes Gregg Carlstrom of non-partisan Middle East news blog The Majlis.

Others are more direct in their critique of Israel's politics. "The country, or at least the current administration, seems incapable of learning from its mistakes," comments The National in an editorial. "It is past time that Israel abandoned its blind determination to kill its enemies. Surely it must be obvious that the political cost outweighs any potential benefit... No public relations campaign can change this fact."

But in another opinion piece for Arab News, Ramzy Baroud claims that Israel has the Western news media "devoted" to pushing a positive image of the country. He stresses that although Israel may take credit for successfully retaining international support for the country, Western media is responsible for Israel's image

"The secret of Israeli 'success,' if any,

was not its own doing," he writes. Yet, "Israeli officials continue to congratulate themselves on a job well done, and must be preparing yet another marvelous [propaganda] campaign," Baroud observes.

Baroud and Israel might agree on one thing though—regardless of their past triumphs, global support for Israel is waning. "Despite the fanfare and self-congratulating commentary, Israel has now largely lost the media war," Baroud concludes.

Carlo Strenger at Haaretz agrees that the Israeli government's policies are mainly responsible for shaping international opinion of the country. "Ultimately Israel's standing in the world hinges on one central factor: the continuing occupation of large parts of the West Bank and maintaining dozens of mini-settlements there," he writes.

"The contrast between Israel's human, cultural, social and economic reality and the paralysis maintained by its political class is stunning," Strenger continues.

On the same day that the PR campaign was announced by the information ministry, Ron Dermer, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's senior advisor, said that the Israeli government must also mount a negative campaign against its enemies, reports the Jerusalem Post.

"To counter the big money invested by Arab states in propaganda against Israel, we have to mobilize our human capital."

Yuli Edelstein, Israeli Information Minister.

One public relations expert, who spoke at the recent annual Herzliya Conference on National Security in Israel, commented that although Israel may be a technologically advanced, sophisticated

country with a high quality of life, the re-branding campaign that the information ministry has proposed will “fail miserably.”

Writing on the blog for his firm Empax, Martin Kace asks, “How is it possible to brand the country in a way that speaks only of progress, fun and modernity, asking of the world to ignore the military and the conflict? It’s not.” Kace goes on to posit that Israel’s attempt at re-branding will not be taken seriously by the international community unless they acknowledge the conflict.

“To bring forth a brand that avoids these is just spin in the eyes of the global public; and the line between spin and outright lie grows thinner by the hour,” he concludes.

Showdown in Iran

As Iran marked the 31st anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, amidst reports of clashes between opposition supporters and police, authorities disrupted the flow of information by preventing journalists from covering opposition activity, drastically slowing internet service in Iran, and shutting down text messaging services, according to a report by News Media.

Iran’s renewed moves against the media coincided with the launch of IPI’s World Press Freedom Review 2009 – Focus on the Middle East and North Africa.

The report noted, “The government of Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has long implemented some of the world’s most repressive policies towards the media. This year, however, Iran became the leading jailer of journalists in the world, imprisoning over 100 reporters and bloggers in the aftermath of the disputed elections.”

Reacting to Iran’s latest efforts to disrupt the flow of information, IPI Director David Dudge argued, “No amount of censorship of the world’s media can prevent information from escaping and the Iranian government would do well to reflect this reality rather than acting as if information can still be controlled and blocked.”

Link TV also remarks that in an attempt to stifle freedom of expression, the

opposition turnout was dwarfed by huge crowds at the state-run celebrations in the center of Tehran waving Iranian flags and carrying placards declaring the “US and Britain the brothers of the devil”, and “Down with Israel.”

As Iranian state-controlled television beamed images of rallies supporting the regime in different cities, several Western and Arab television networks were reporting clashes between protesters and security forces in Tehran, Mashhad, Esfahan, Ahvaz, Shiraz and Tabriz.

A video posted on YouTube, showing an Iranian security official pummeling an unarmed demonstrator, was rebroadcast on several media outlets without confirming whether the video was shot recently or during the events surrounding the 2009 presidential election.

“No amount of censorship of the world’s media can prevent information from escaping and the Iranian government would do well to reflect this reality.”

David Dudge, Director of International Press Institute.

Following in the footsteps of China, Iranian authorities blocked access to Google and other internet service providers. SMS messages were interrupted, and internet communication was brought to a halt.

Three major international broadcasters operating in the region, the BBC, Deutsche Welle and the Voice of America, have also recently accused the Iranian regime of “deliberate electronic interference” in their broadcasts.

Columnist Roger Cohen of The New York Times recommends targeting the censors in Iran, imposing sanctions and promoting greater freedom of expression by bolstering Iran’s opposition movement as well as weakening the Revolutionary Guards’ stranglehold on society and the economy.

Richard R. Verma, an assistant secretary for legislative affairs at the State Department, wrote to Carl Levin, the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, informing him that the State Department had asked the Treasury to waive certain sanctions on Iran relating to the export of technology.

It is currently illegal for Microsoft to offer MSN Messenger in Iran. “With respect to Iran, human rights and free speech efforts have been made illegal under federal law!” said techie Austin Heap, “Sanctions are deterring people from doing things to help.”

Cohen further argues that the US is shooting itself in the foot by putting greater restrictions on technology imports to Iran as they could serve American interests, especially in the hands of the opposition.

White House officials argue that their strategy of engagement has been a form of pressure, remarks David Ignatius for The Washington Post. According to him, today’s Iran is “far more divided internally; it has lost much of its legitimacy within the Muslim world, with the regional balance of power tipping the other way for the first time in years; and it is more isolated internationally, no longer able to count on Russia as a reliable patron.”

Ignatius goes on to argue, “In dealing with Tehran, the United States should place a series of different wagers -- betting on Iranian democracy in the long run.”

Helle Dale of The Heritage Foundation recommends using the tools of American public diplomacy in the service of pro-democracy movements and regime change in Iran, particularly through US broadcasting programs, such as Radio Free Iran.

Dale advises that its programs’ funding should be “generously increased,” targeting radio rather than the television. She points out that the television is a medium that is vulnerable, due to the visibility of satellite dishes in Iran. “Internet is also

clearly sensitive to government control and interference, as is cell phone service, which makes them vulnerable,” Dale adds.

Yet, Dale notes that today in the media era, it is impossible to entirely control the flow and content of information, and that the US government should continue to work with Iranians abroad by setting up pro-democracy websites through third party organizations.

“The US government should announce that regime change is official US policy, which will certainly lend moral support to Iranians under severe pressure at home,” she concludes, favoring stronger pressure and threats in dealing with Iran.

The Green Movement, led by Hossein Moussavi, demands the removal of Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Mousavi also seeks to support the opposition, although “prospects for regime change have seemed to me less likely over time rather than more likely,” notes Marc Lynch for Foreign Policy. The internet may or may not have played a decisive role in fueling the Green Movement, but either way, the regime is now prepared to shut it down when necessary.

Lynch believes, “The Iranian regime is more unpopular and less legitimate than ever before -- but just don’t see it as especially vulnerable at the moment.” He consequently agrees with Obama’s decision to refrain from supporting opposition movements in Iran, indicating the limits of American influence.

Lynch concludes that eventually sanctions and negotiations are the only tools left in the US arsenal in dealing with Iran, greatly limiting the possible scope of results.

Avatar the Movie: Connections to Public Diplomacy and Theology?

The new James Cameron sci-fi movie Avatar has made box office history, gathering the biggest worldwide gross for any film including Titanic, another Cameron produced movie, writes John

Brown in his Notes and Essays blog.

Besides its huge box office success and the innovative use of technology and stunning visual effects, Avatar has also managed to stir up debates regarding its alleged connection to American propaganda and foreign policy.

In an article for the Huffington Post, Brown compares the protagonist Jake Sully’s venture into Pandora, the Garden-of-Eden-like planet, to the experiences of a Public Diplomacy Service officer placed in a foreign country to provide Intel.

Through his personal experience as a Public Diplomacy officer, or an “Avatar” using terms from the movie, Brown describes how meeting people from other societies on his assignments in Eastern Europe and facilitating understanding between the two cultures while obtaining vital information at the same time, is similar to Sully’s encounter with the Na’vis from the Pandora.

Currently an adjunct Professor of Liberal Studies at Georgetown University, Brown warns that while the film is ideally meant to be watched using 3-D glasses to better grasp the producer’s message, viewers should use their “third eye” to focus on every dimension in the movie, with keener vision and deeper understanding.

He concludes on his Notes and Essays blog spot that the “lessons” of the movie are condemned by some as slick propaganda reflecting a leftist, pantheistic, anti-Americanism point of view.

On the other hand, Brown reports that the controversy surrounding Avatar grabbed the attention of religious viewers, who called for some theological analysis of the film’s subtle messages. The Vatican City in particular showed concern over the spiritual overtones of the movie.

A cultural critic for the Vatican’s Holy See daily newspaper reviewed the movie concluding that despite its “stupefying, enchanting technology,” the movie “gets bogged down by a spiritualism linked to the worship of nature.”

The review was reprinted in Catholic journals around the world, with the consensus that Avatar’s “implied heresy overrides any other reasons to warrant approval for viewing.” However, not

all religious figures held the same view.

In Rabbi Benjamin Blech’s opinion, Avatar is a movie that should not be missed because of the numerous positive Jewish references and insights portrayed. Brown remarks that the “connections with Torah, Midrash, and Hebrew words are just too frequent and striking to be accidental.”

Cameron’s choice of words for and names in the movie may have lead to this assumption. The roots of the word Na’vi, the inhabitants of Pandora, means seer in Hebrew, or someone with the capacity to see more than others, and also happens to mean prophet. Similarly, Brown notes that the name of the God the Na’vis revered, Eywa, is a mere re-arrangement of the four-letter Jewish name for the Almighty.

In an interview with Agence France-Presse, Cameron discussed his vision of the movie as being a metaphor of our society’s abuse of guns, technology and power. He notes that this lifestyle will lead to adverse effects on mankind “if we don’t wise up and start seeking a life that’s in balance with the natural cycles of life on earth.” Brown points out that this message is repeated countless times in the Torah.

Clinton Seeks Gulf Cooperation on the Iranian Question

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke about foreign policy issues at the annual US-Islamic World Forum in Doha, Qatar, reports Al-Jazeera English. The event was jointly organized by the Qatari foreign ministry and the Brookings Institution, based in Washington, DC.

In an attempt to reach out to the Gulf states and their citizens, the Secretary of State called for a new beginning in US-Middle Eastern relations. “It is time, as President Obama said in his speech in Cairo, for a new beginning based on a commitment to open dialogue and equal partnership,” she asserted. She also reiterated the US’s engagement in deepening this relationship, but called for patience from the Arab world as the results “cannot be achieved overnight.”

Clinton commented on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and addressed the need to resume negotiations, but her speech, as well as the press conferences and question and answer sessions during the other stops of her Gulf tour, reflected the Obama administration's top priority, Iran.

According to Mark Landler at the New York Times, Clinton's aggressive pursuit for cooperation on the Iranian issue was unprecedented. "Mrs. Clinton encouraged Iran's religious and political leaders to rise up against the Revolutionary Guards, coming as close as any senior administration official has to inviting political upheaval in the country," he comments.

Clinton spoke of the changing political climate in Iran at a gathering of students from a Doha university. "We see that the government of Iran, the supreme leader, the president, the Parliament is being supplanted and that Iran is moving toward a military dictatorship," she stated.

"Iran leaves the international community little choice but to impose greater costs for its provocative steps."

US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton.

The Secretary's words were further evidence of a recent shift in the Obama administration's policy towards Iran. The administration is preparing a new, tougher set of sanctions for the Islamic Republic, to be enacted by the United Nations. The sanctions will specifically target the Revolutionary Guard, which according to Clinton has accelerated the marginalization of religious and political leaders since the 2009 Iranian presidential elections.

According to Glenn Kessler for The Washington Post, US officials said that the new UN sanctions, while targeting the elites in Iran's political society,

will not have an effect on "ordinary Iranians." Clinton's tough stance on Iran has been motivated partially by recent developments concerning Iran's nuclear program. The leadership of Iran has refused to discuss its nuclear program with other nations, cutting off the possibility of engagement with the United States. "Iran leaves the international community little choice but to impose greater costs for its provocative steps," cautioned Clinton.

The Secretary of State also took her message to Saudi Arabia, where she met with King Abdullah and Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal.

At a conference with the Saudi Foreign Minister, Clinton declared that she hoped "the religious and political leaders of Iran act to take back the authority which they should be exercising on behalf of the people."

In Clinton's visit to Saudi Arabia, she also pushed for the Kingdom to play a role in pressuring Beijing to agree with the new sanctions against Iran. China, a member of the UN Security Council, wields veto power. Chinese officials have been reluctant to agree with tougher sanctions on the Islamic Republic due to the nation's economic ties with Iran.

According to Al-Jazeera, US officials hinted that Saudi Arabia could help convince China "by offering Beijing guarantees it would meet Chinese oil requirements, a step that might ease Beijing's reluctance to impose further sanctions on Iran."

For his part, Saud Al-Faisal remained to some extent hesitant about the effectiveness of sanctions against Iran, although he concedes they may work in the long term. He claimed that Saudis are anxious about the short-term consequences because they "are [geographically] closer to the threat."

Saud Al-Faisal added that Chinese officials "need no suggestion from Saudi Arabia to do what they ought to do."

The Secretary of State also spoke with female Saudi students at Dar Al-Hekma College. According to another article by Mark Landler at The New York Times, the students asked Clinton about Israel, Iran, and even the domestic health-care reform debate in the US. Declining to comment directly about Israel, Clinton

continued to criticize Iran, identifying it as the "world's largest supporter of terrorism" and a threat to Saudi Arabia.

Out With the Old, In With the New: Development in the MENA Region

Vinton Cerf, one of the innovators behind the Internet Protocol Suite, spoke at the "Google Arabia 2.0" Forum in February, reports Mohammed Nasser at Asharq-Alawsat.

Executives and government officials from the MENA region gathered to discuss internet content in the Arab world at the forum, which took place in Dubai.

In an address to the attending officials, Cerf expressed great interest in developing Arab language internet content. "The company attaches great importance to the services that it provides to users in the region and Arab users in particular. My personal concern for this issue is one of the reasons for my forthcoming visit to Dubai, and I will try to focus on the aspects of development and improvement that we can add to the services and information that we provide to the region," he stated.

Currently, the Arab world has limited access to Arabic-language content on the internet. Cerf stated that it is a "widely known fact that the MENA region currently produces less than one percent of content online in Arabic." He viewed these limitations as both a challenge and an opportunity for technological innovators in the region.

Investors, technological experts, and politicians alike view the internet as a powerful tool in the MENA region. Many innovators are pushing for an increase and the further development of social media tools, such as Twitter and Facebook. Regional businesses are trying to capitalize on the social media boom, even during the economic recession.

"Social media marketing is the most effective marketing approach because it is viral and much cheaper

than other forms of marketing,” writes Gaith Saqer at Arab Crunch.

Saqer comments that social media marketing in the Arab world is “still in its baby steps.” He remarks that the statistics, which show that more Arabs are using social media tools, should encourage public relations and advertising firms to take a more technologically sophisticated approach.

“There are around seven million members from the Arab world on Facebook, hundreds of thousands of blogs coming from users from this region, and around 40% traffic from Arab ISPs is going to Youtube,” he claims.

Other entrepreneurs are attempting to capitalize on mobile phones, which are more ubiquitous than computers or internet access in the region.

“As you know, in general the people in the Middle East rely heavily on mobile phones in obtaining information, which highlights the importance of accessing information via handheld devices on the move, as the phone in some cases becomes the means to connect you to the information that you require,” Cerf commented.

In a Booz & Company press release posted at AME Info, mobile devices are being touted as “another high-growth platform for media companies, thanks to the rapid penetration of smartphone devices and growth of applications.”

According to the report, the Middle East has approximately four times as many mobile users as desktop internet users. The report states that in many emerging markets, mobile devices offer a much more popular platform for content distribution than the internet.

Although the development of Arabic content and the push for technology and social media platforms continues, Molouk Ba-isa for Arab News is calling for a “digital timeout.” As spring break begins for students in Saudi Arabia, he fears that young people will be spending all their time “watching television, playing video games, surfing the net, listening to music and talking on the phone.”

Arab News spoke with Dr. Peter Tesler of Manhattan’s Physician Group. Tesler noted that the concentration

of exposure to media has dramatically increased, due to multitasking.

He emphasized that parents must take an active role in their children’s use of technology. “Parents would be very unhappy to learn about the personal information and photographs that their children are posting at sites such as Facebook,” Tesler stated, promoting limiting media use and encouraging exercise.

Ba-isa concludes, “Parents have the power to provide youngsters with guidance on media use. Those who chose to be involved in controlling media resources can help their children have healthy, happy lives.”

A Bleak Future for Al-Hurra?

Michel Chandour of Al-Hurra discussed relations between the US and Muslim communities in an interview with US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, posted at the US Department of State website. During the interview, Clinton reiterated the US government’s policy of engagement following President Barack Obama’s vision of a “new beginning” between the United States and the Muslim world.

“PR attempts to win Arab hearts and minds have to date fallen on deaf ears.”

Director of the Journalism Training Program, American University of Beirut.

But one of State’s flagship initiatives in the Arab world, the Arabic language television channel Al-Hurra, is often criticized. Magda Abu-Fadil at The Huffington Post writes that Al-Hurra is pointless and irrelevant to Arab audiences, who remain non-responsive. Mistrust over the fact that it Al-Hurra

an American channel persists, and much of the Arab population perceive it as a propaganda outlet for the US government.

According Al-Hurra officials, the station has no hidden agenda and broadcasts news and entertainment programs in keeping with the high journalistic standards of other news outlets. However, “PR attempts to win Arab hearts and minds have to date fallen on deaf ears and eyes and run red ink all over the books, with legislators in Washington demanding to see more tangible results,” argues Abu Fadil.

“I don’t know why they spend money to establish these channels, notably the Americans who won’t convince us of their views, whatever they do, since they’re an occupation force in Iraq and support Israel everywhere,” Ali Darwish told Lebanon’s An-Nahar.

Obama Still Inspire Hope

According to recent polls, US President Barack Obama’s popularity is on the decline, remarks Wajahat Ali for the Huffington Post. After helping to re-brand America and promising new levels of engagement with foreign countries, many people around the world have grown disenchanted with what they perceive as a lack of follow-through.

The ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the unflinching US commitment to Israel despite the Jewish state’s highly contentious policies towards its neighbors, and the US support of corrupt Arab regimes all contribute to the decline in Obama’s approval rating, especially among Muslim populations.

Ali remarks that nonetheless, “We must calmly step back and analyze Obama’s current decline in popularity in light of the tremendous misfortune he inherited from the previous administration.” Ali comments that the polls do point toward a potential reconciliation between the US and Muslim communities, based on President Obama’s promise to engage Muslims as partners and to end a “cycle of suspicion and discord” with them.

However, if Obama truly wishes “to seek a

new beginning between the US and Muslims all around the world” as he promised in Cairo, writes Ali, “then he will have to firmly confront Israel over its continued humiliation of the Palestinian people.”

As a step in further engaging with the Muslim world, President Obama spoke via video conference to the US-Islamic World Forum in Doha, Qatar, reports Fox News. Obama talked about ending the war in Iraq, and his support for a two-state solution in the Middle East. Obama also announced that he has appointed Rashad Hussain to be a special envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference.

As the president emphasized the US partnership with the Muslim world on numerous levels, he reiterated his pledge to deepen these partnerships, and to develop others.

However, Leon T. Hadar, analyst and correspondent at The Huffington Post, concurs that the legacy left by the Bush administration remains a major obstacle in achieving the goals set at the start of Obama’s presidency.

Bush’s strikingly pro-Israel policies gave fuel to anti-American elements in Iran, and that administration’s demonstrated belligerence also gave Tehran excuse and incentive to further develop its nuclear program, Hadar writes. Consequently, Iran is now less likely to be receptive to new initiatives coming from the Obama administration.

“Less than vigorous economic recovery coupled with Obama’s mounting domestic political problems ... has made it even more difficult for Obama to pursue his Mideast initiatives,” Hadar continues. He concludes that with the partisan divide growing steadily larger in Washington, Obama is more dependent than ever on support from conservatives in his party and Republicans, who often are stringently pro-Israeli, and by extension anti-Iran.

Indeed, in many respects, raising the diplomatic and economic pressure on Iran may have become the path of least political resistance for Obama, although it is broadly popular across the bipartisan board.

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