

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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Hill Testimony and Biden Trip Feature Public Diplomacy

The US public diplomacy effort has been highlighted on a number of occasions recently, as the White House announced that Vice President Joe Biden will be sent to the Middle East, Under Secretary of State Judith McHale publishes a new “roadmap” for public diplomacy, and former Under-Secretary of State James Glassman prepares for an upcoming testimony before the US Senate.

President Barack Obama announced that he will send Vice President Joe Biden to the Middle East on a public diplomacy tour in an attempt to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, reports Reuters.

A “main component” of Biden’s trip will be “reassuring anxious Israelis” about the Obama administration’s dedication to the security of Israel, while simultaneously stressing the need for reconciliation.

Biden also plans to stop in the Palestinian Territories, Egypt, and Jordan, reports the Daily Beast.

Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy Judith McHale has put forth a much-anticipated plan for the future of US public diplomacy, and Director of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy (CPD) Philip Seib calls the strategy “a stunning disappointment” on the CPD blog.

Seib claims that US public diplomacy has largely remained lacking direction, despite President Obama’s professed interest in engaging populations around the world.

The CPD director states that the roadmap “hardly represents the ‘strategic approach for the 21st century.’” He criticizes the rhetoric used in the plan, citing some of its clichéd, vague objectives, such as “combat violent extremism”

and “better inform policy-making.”

“For those of us who had hoped that the Obama administration would bring new vitality and decisiveness to public diplomacy, the approach taken by the State Department is terribly deflating,” Seib writes.

On his Mountain Runner blog, Matt Armstrong posted some of the testimony that former Under Secretary of State James Glassman intends to give at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing. Glassman will attend the hearing with McHale and two more of her predecessors.

“Here is the problem with public diplomacy,” Glassman’s preliminary testimonial reads, according to Armstrong. “It is not today being taken seriously as a tool of national security by policymakers.”

Armstrong writes that the former Under Secretary will emphasize the need for a new narrative in US public diplomacy— one that gives priority to the audience and not the broadcaster, similar to the policies he called for during his tenure at State. Glassman will also highlight the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which has a new slate of board members still awaiting confirmation.

Spencer Ackerman, a journalist for the Washington Independent and formerly of The New Republic, writes on his blog Attackerman that Glassman’s proposition is “a very good idea.” Ackerman agrees that promoting a positive account of US policies would be an effective public diplomacy campaign, although he comments that concrete policies must also back up such a public relations initiative.

Clinton Confronts Censorship Amidst Concerns for Privacy

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has recently announced that a new focus of American foreign policy will be an “open war” on authoritarian control of the internet, according to Aaron Church at The Heritage Foundation.

Google, the global internet giant, has been embroiled in a high-profile

In this issue:

Hill Testimony and Biden Trip Feature Public Diplomacy	1
Clinton Confronts Censorship Amidst Concerns for Privacy	1
Iranian Government Capitalizing on Media Proliferation	2
Pentagon Gives Green Light for Social Media Access	3
Cartoon Controversy Continues	4
Uncovering the Arabian Dream: Global Citizens in a Democratic Society	4
Microsoft’s Bing Self-Censors in the Middle East	5
Egyptian Blogger Tried and Freed, Until Further Notice	5
The Hurt Locker Boosts the Jordanian Film Industry	6
Sleepless in Gaza...and Jerusalem: Spotlight on Palestine	7
References	8

controversy over censorship of its online portals in China, and Secretary Clinton took the opportunity to stress the US position on internet freedom, continues The Heritage Foundation article.

“New technologies do not take sides in the struggle for freedom and progress, [but] the United States does,” Clinton asserted.

But some feel the State Department is not doing enough to combat the censorious practices of some regimes, especially Iran, says Ian Swanson at The Hill’s Hillicon Valley blog. Swanson writes that “a coalition of pro-democracy groups” sent Secretary Clinton recently wrote a letter requesting more transparency for a series of State Department grants which aim at promoting internet freedom in Iran, adding that they should be allocated based on merit, not political biases.

Swanson remarks that a bipartisan coalition of five senators also sent a letter to Secretary Clinton, requesting that the funds be released in a timely manner and that they will also consider awarding grants to “groups working outside the borders of authoritarian regimes such as Iran.”

Former US Secretary of Commerce Carlos Gutierrez praised the Secretary of State for “her staunch defense of internet freedom” in an opinion piece for The Detroit News. He stresses that the volatile and unprotected online environment created by the intense surveillance of dictatorial governments also has a negative economic impact.

“If companies feel their proprietary information is not safe [from state-sponsored hackers], they will not invest,” Gutierrez claims. “Economies will only continue to flourish in countries open to ideas from thought leaders in all nations.”

“An unfettered internet can be the world’s highway to freedom,” Gutierrez writes. However, he adds that freedom must be balanced with the issue of protecting personal privacy. “A tricky balance, but, when achieved, could help lead the world from these troubled times into a new age of peace and prosperity.”

Iman Kurdi of the Khaleej Times agrees that while intense filtering may not be the answer, “we need to take a more responsible approach to the privacy of others.” She points out that although

most of the internet is free in many countries, users do not feel personally accountable for proliferating legal but ethically questionable material.

“[Public Diplomacy] is not today being taken seriously as a tool of national security by policymakers.”

James K. Glassman, former US Under Secretary of State.

Ahmed Al-Omran, a well-known blogger in Saudi Arabia, told Fox News that even in his ultra-conservative country, internet censorship is proving to be unwieldy and ineffective. He says that although the government “sees the internet mostly as a threat,” huge numbers of young people are using the internet to voice their opinions on subjects and issues that they have never been able to address in a public forum.

Although Fox News highlights that Saudi Arabia is one of the most oppressive Arab regimes when it comes to freedom of speech, Al-Omran, who has received death threats and reprimands, is still optimistic.

“The government is finding that censorship just doesn’t work anymore,” Al-Omran said. “We’ve all become reporters without borders. The red lines of our society are slowly crumbling.”

Iranian Government Capitalizing on Media Proliferation

Three days after allegedly being captured by Iranian officials, Abdulmalek Rigi’s confession was aired on the state-controlled outlet Press TV, reports the Los Angeles Times.

The events surrounding Rigi’s capture and activities remain uncertain, but the state-owned media is playing an important role in using Rigi’s capture to promote the Ahmadinejad administration’s agenda, continues the article.

Abdulmalek Rigi is the leader of Jundallah, a militant anti-establishment movement fighting on behalf of Sunni Muslims of the Baluchi ethnic group. Robert Mackey, at the New York Times, notes that the Jundallah have killed hundreds of Iranian soldiers and civilians since 2003. The militant group also claimed responsibility for a series of bombings in Iran, including one in October, which killed 15 members of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard and 25 civilians.

Media reports surrounding the circumstances of Rigi’s arrest differ. According to BBC News, Ettela’at, an Iranian newspaper, viewed Abdulmalek Rigi as a representation of outside forces who are working for the destruction of Iran. The BBC points out that Iran, through state-owned media, appears to be capitalizing and using the media to promote its own view and message concerning Rigi’s arrest.

Iran took a direct stab at foreign media, accusing “pro-terrorist” Al-Arabiya, the BBC, and Voice of America of supporting Jundallah’s activities.

“New technologies do not take sides in the struggle for freedom and progress, [but] the United States does.”

Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State.

Iran is also capitalizing on the media through the use of mobile phones. The Ministry of Intelligence and Security sent out a mass text message to all Iranians announcing Rigi’s capture. “The capture of Abdulmalek Rigi, the famous terrorist, is the gift of the

unknown soldiers of the 12th Imam to the Iranian nation,” the text message read.

Aside from using state-owned media to promote its message, Iranian officials continue to censor domestic media sources, shutting down publications that disparage the government or openly support the opposition movement in Iran.

On March 1, Iran’s press watchdog banned the best-selling daily Etemad, reports Iran Focus. Etemad, which means “trust” in Farsi, published controversial comments by former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami. Khatami said that the country is currently facing a “crisis.”

“Part of [this decision] is about having a trained workforce that is savvy in how you operate in the information age.”

David Wennergren, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense.

According to a report at Al-Jazeera, ISNA News Agency provided a vague explanation for the ban on Etemad. “The press watchdog banned Etemad and referred the case to the judiciary for repeated and persistent violations,” said Al-Jazeera, without providing specifics of the publication’s offenses against the Iranian government.

Mohammad Ali Ramin, Iran’s deputy culture minister for media affairs, stressed that the publication had received “repeated warnings,” before the official banning. Claiming that the press watchdog had no choice but to ban Etemad, Ramin added, “The decision was taken with a degree of leniency..Its license was not revoked and its case was referred to the judiciary.”

The weekly Irandokht, which means “Daughter of Iran,” also had its license revoked. According to Iran Focus, security forces raided the publication’s office in December 2009. Emadeddin Baghi, a journalist and advocate for human rights, was jailed after the incident. ISNA claimed that it revoked Irandokht’s license over “not meeting the conditions in the press law on practical commitment to the institution.”

Pentagon Gives Green Light for Social Media Access

In a reversal of previous policies, the Department of Defense recently decided to allow the use of social networks, reports CNET News. The new guidelines will allow for the Pentagon’s non-classified network to access social media tools such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and blogs, although personnel are still expected to exercise caution and discretion.

The DoD announced in a press release that it now recognizes that new media could play a role in facilitating communication between the Pentagon and the general public, although officials will “continue to defend against malicious activity on military information networks.” However, sites containing ethically questionable content, such as pornography or hate crimes, will still be banned.

The new policy does not allow for blanket access to all social media at any time, Reuters explains. Commanders will still have the authority to “temporarily limit” internet access prior to a major military operation, or if bandwidth is in short supply.

Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense David Wennergren told Reuters that the DoD’s new goal is to educate their workforce on what information is allowed to be disseminated beyond military personnel.

“There are 10,000 ways [besides social media] people could still compromise a mission,” Wennergren told the wire service. “So part of this is about having a trained workforce that is savvy in how you operate in the information age.”

David Meerman Scott claims on The Huffington Post that the decision pushes the DoD “far out in front” of many American corporations. He explains that many companies view social media as a security threat or drain on productivity, when in fact they “need to understand that this is the way people communicate in 2010.”

Scott also stresses that social media is already an “important force” in military public affairs departments, citing a statement an Air Force captain heading Air Force communications in Haiti: “We’re not launching missiles, we’re launching ideas.”

Karen Wilkinson at Government Technology highlights that the policy “appears to complement the Obama administration’s Open Government Directive,” which emphasizes government transparency.

The DoD senior strategist for emerging media, Jack Holt, told Government Technology that the Pentagon is now trying to view the internet as “a field to be maneuvered,” rather than staying behind a virtual “fortress” and “sticking our head in the sand.”

But Nathan Hodge of the ‘Danger Room’ blog at Wired remains skeptical of the new policy. He refers to an anonymous Air Force network administrator who wrote to say he had to read about the policy shift on the Danger Room, “not through a DoD website.”

Hodge goes on to say that he has received numerous complaints and alerts from readers who claim that they are still unable to access some social media sites. “Those are just a few examples of the yawning gap between theory and practice when it comes to the military’s use of Web 2.0,” he writes.

However, in a different post at Wired, Nathan Hodge highlights a smartphone for Army personnel that could “access everything from technical manuals and maintenance records to maps and cultural intelligence.” The device could also include GPS and tools to help soldiers analyze terrain.

Hodge says the smartphones are part of a Defense project called “Connecting Soldiers to Digital Applications,” which is still in the trial phase at Fort Bliss

in Texas. Other projects underway include a contest to develop mobile and web applications that could be useful to soldiers, and developing new controllers for unmanned vehicles.

Coinciding with the DoD's social media announcement, an embarrassing incident occurred within the Israeli military reports Reuters. Israel was forced to abandon a raid in the Palestinian territories "after a soldier posted details, including time and place," on Facebook. Some cite this incident as an argument against the expansion of internet access in the US military.

Cartoon Controversy Continues

A Danish publication, Politiken, received criticism from the European media when its editor-in-chief, Toeger Seidenfaden, apologized for re-circulating Kurt Westergaard's infamous cartoon, reports the Associated Press.

The cartoon, depicting the Prophet Muhammad wearing a turban in the shape of a lit bomb, was first published in the Danish publication Jyllands-Posten five years ago. According to the BBC, Politiken and other Danish newspapers re-published the cartoon in 2008 as an act of solidarity after police disclosed an alleged plot to kill Westergaard.

The apology was not for publishing the cartoon, asserts Seidenfaden, but for accidentally offending Muslims. But the Politken editor-in-chief also explained that the apology was "part of a settlement with a Saudi lawyer representing eight Muslim groups" around the world, continues the AP.

Seidenfaden clarified further that Politiken published the cartoon, "not as a statement of editorial opinion or values but merely as part of the newspaper's news coverage," and they did not intend to offend the Muslim world, according to CNSNews. He added that Politiken hoped the apology could be a "unique chance" to foster dialogue and repair the relations between Denmark and the Muslim world.

The Danish paper which originally published the cartoon denounced Politiken's apology, reports the BBC. "Politiken's pathetic prostrating before a Saudi lawyer takes the first prize in stupidity," said Jorn Mikkelsen, Jyllands-Posten's editor-in-chief.

Douglas Murray of The Telegraph is also sharply critical of Politiken's apology, stating that the editor-in-chief's decision to apologize "grotesquely trampled on the solidarity the Danish press has shown in the cartoons affair."

Murray emphasizes that those who claim to be descendants of a "dead historical figure" are not necessarily entitled to "have their feelings respected any more than anyone else." He adds, "I trust from now on that anybody, internationally, who has ever found anything offensive in the paper in question will ensure they too get an apology."

"Politiken has abandoned the battle for freedom of speech."

Jorn Mikkelsen, Jyllands-Posten Editor-in-Chief.

Similarly, several European publications and Danish politicians, including the prime minister, have also denounced Politiken's apology as a defeat of free speech in the face of pressure from the Muslim world. According to Presseurope, the Jyllands-Posten editor-in-chief stated, "Politiken has abandoned the battle for freedom of speech," calling Politiken's apology "shameful."

The Associated Press reports that Danish Prime Minister Lars Loekke Rasmussen was "surprised" by the apology, adding that he is concerned that the Danish media are no longer "standing shoulder to shoulder on this issue."

Nordic news service Ice News cites several other prominent Danish politicians, who called the apology "crazy," "deeply

embarrassing," and a "total sell-out."

However, the Danish Muslim community responded favorably to Politiken's apology, declares the AP. One moderate imam told the wire service, "It is beyond any doubt [Politiken has] offended some people. It is a nice and human gesture that the newspaper apologizes."

One lawyer involved with the case stressed that the settlement is a positive outcome to the controversy, according to Ice News. "It would be wrong to speak of a victory," the lawyer said, emphasizing that the suit has pressured both sides to come to an understanding over the events that led up to the cartoons. "Politiken is courageous in apologizing," he continued.

Ice News also pointed out that Seidenfaden, the Politiken editor-in-chief, suggested that the settlement and apology could even "reduce the tensions that have shown themselves to be so resilient," and expressed a hope that "relations between Denmark...and the Muslim world can be improved."

Uncovering the Arabian Dream: Global Citizens in a Democratic Society

Based on the second annual ASDA'A Burson-Marsteller Arab Youth Survey, most Arab youth, regardless of their ethnicity, nationality or religion consider themselves global citizens, and prefer to live in a democratic society with good relations with the international community, writes Hala Khalaf for The National.

The survey was conducted in October 2009 by the international polling firm Penn Schoen & Berland Associated (PSB), and was comprised of 2,000 face-to-face interviews with Arab nationals and Arab expatriates. The subjects were all between the ages of 18-24 and live in nine Middle Eastern countries-- Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon.

The revelation of that Arab youth

regard themselves as “citizens of the world” counters the common Western misperception that Arabs are “conservative and inward-looking,” comments The Peninsula.

According to the survey, the top priorities listed among the interviewees included living in a democratic society, followed by good infrastructure and a good educational system, writes Rachelle Klinger of The Media Line.

In Kuwait, 99% of the surveyed youth were concerned the most about democracy among 16 other topics, with 97%-85% of youth in the remaining countries also listing democracy as their top priority, according to the Kipp Report.

The Middle East business director at PSB, Robert Kellman, stresses that while living in a democratic society was the subjects’ top-ranked priority, it does not mean that they are straying from the traditional framework of their societies into an American-style democracy.

Kellman tell the news source that instead, “They want democracy, but they want it here in the Arab world,” adding that, “Arab youths are prioritizing democratic institutions that encapsulate aspects of the Arab mindset.”

However, the Global Vice Chair of Burson-Marsteller and former US Under Secretary of State Karen Hughes highlighted some serious concerns among Arab youth when announcing the survey results in Dubai.

“More than two-thirds of respondents were very concerned about the rising cost of living, while the shortage of affordable housing was their second biggest worry, followed by unemployment,” announced Hughes in a news conference, reports Middle East Online.

Hughes adds that despite their worries, “In general, youth in the Middle East are confident about the direction in which the region is heading.” Kellman agrees, saying that “the main highlights [of the survey] are how optimistic youth are given the recession.”

While the first Arab youth study in 2008 was based on an online survey only, Kellman believes that the second survey has greater reach and depth, reports AME Info. He asserts, “The interview

sample is weighted to reflect the socio-economic make-up of the participating countries, the geographical distribution of the population within them, and the opinions of women as well as men.”

The Chief Executive Officer of ASDA/A Burson-Marsteller, Sunil John, emphasizes the importance of such initiatives in “addressing the needs of the Middle East’s largest demographic,” and utilizing “an evidence-based approach is essential to understanding and meeting those needs.”

Similarly, another regional partner of the public relations consultancy, Joseph Ghossoub, discussed the significance and implications of the study in the region.

“By examining a wide range of issues, the insights from the survey will be of relevance to the broadest spectrum of experts, including policymakers, marketers, the business community and the media.”

Ghossoub adds, “Our hope is that the survey results will spark greater understanding of the priorities and indeed action on the ground.”

Microsoft’s Bing Self-Censors in the Middle East

The Open Net Initiative (ONI), a partnership between the University of Toronto and Harvard University, has released a report exposing Microsoft’s search engine Bing for censoring its site in the Middle East. The experiment showed that Bing “filters Arabic and English keywords that could yield sex- or LGBT-related images and content.”

Testing Bing’s filter was conducted by manually inputting an exhaustive list of Arabic and English keywords, in a variety of combinations, from inside Arab countries. The MIT Technology Review points out that one “curious discovery” of the ONI report is the inconsistent filtering of some explicit words and not others. But Bing “left no stone unturned when it came to blocking words... having to do with homosexuality.”

ONI notes that while Microsoft claims

that the blocks are consistent with the policies of the respective countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, “social filtering, including filtering, is not practiced by all countries in MENA.”

“Microsoft has signaled its willingness to be at the forefront in protecting freedom of expression around the world,” the report continues. “It is difficult to reconcile this position with Bing’s current filtering standards.”

But Andy Greenberg, writing on the Forbes blog Velocity, states that “Microsoft, unlike Google, never said that it wouldn’t be evil.” He claims that although Google does censor its search engine in a few countries, most notably China, “it censors in far fewer countries than Microsoft.”

Greenberg reiterates a point made in the ONI report itself— that even in Arab countries such as Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, all of which have no internet censorship, “Microsoft has taken its own, prudish initiative here.”

Khaled Al-Saleh at The Next Web emphasizes that the Bing censorship is not unique to the Middle East, but also applies to India, Turkey, and many East Asian countries.

“This senseless move just crippled the internet further,” Al-Saleh laments. He advises users in the Middle East to bypass the filters by accessing Bing through the American or British portals.

Egyptian Blogger Tried and Freed, Until Further Notice

The 20-year old Egyptian blogger, Ahmed Mostafa, facing military trial for allegedly “publishing false information on his blog a year ago, on February 15, 2009” has been released, reports Bikya Masr.

The engineering student was detained on February 25th after being informed of a communiqué filed against him by the Egyptian military academy for “disseminating false information about the

armed forces,” and “tarnishing the military’s image,” states the Associated Press.

Mostafa was given a week to issue an official apology for his ‘false’ corruption accusation, with implications that the case could be revived should he not comply.

In his condemned “What happened to you, oh nation?” blog, Mostafa wrote about the corruption and alleged favoritism in the recruiting process at the country’s military academy. He claimed that a teacher’s son was pushed out of the academy in favor of a candidate from a wealthier background capable of making financial contributions to the institute, reports BBC citing its correspondent in Cairo, Christian Fraser.

Following Mostafa’s arrest on February 25th, the military prosecutor conducted a swift investigation, reports Bikya Masr, putting the defendant in detention pending further findings before transferring the case after three days to the military court for a quick trial.

“No civilian should be tried before a military court, and no government that claims to respect human rights should be prosecuting someone solely for writing about corruption.”

Joe Stork, Deputy Middle East Director at Human Rights Watch

It is the first time in the country’s history that a military court was convened for a blogger, says Agence France Presse, considering that other bloggers have been sentenced to prison by other courts, or silenced without being tried.

“This should not have gone to a military court,” said the director of the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information (ANHRI), Gamal Eid, adding that such trials are typically “unfair and speedy.”

Under Egypt’s emergency laws, the military court is allowed indefinite detention and trial of civilians. The law has been on force since Islamic militants assassinated President Anwar Sadat in 1981, writes Marwa Awad for Reuters.

According to Mostafa’s brother Hossam, security officials met with Mostafa prior to the arrest forcing him to provide the password for his blog, reports Awad. “They changed the password and barred him from accessing his blog,” Hossam said, but did not delete the blog in question.

The first hearing took place on the March 1st and was adjourned till March 7th due to the defense lawyers insisting on more time to examine all the evidence from the case, including the prosecution’s investigation report.

However, Eid tells Al-Masry Al-Youm that “the court has refused to give the lawyers full access to the documents and accused them of leaking information about the case to the press.”

Some evidence was labeled “confidential” said Eid before adding, “After all, this is a military court and its judges are policemen. It is not a fair trial.”

An ANHRI lawyer, Mohamed Mahmoud, present at the hearing voiced the same concern. “We were subjected to strict and unreasonable security measures, as well as the court insisting on the presence of assigned defense, though we are Ahmed’s official defense,” says Mahmoud.

Mostafa’s arrest has drawn criticism from international human rights organizations. According to the Cairo-based rights group website, “ANHRI stresses the illegitimacy of criminal prosecutions in publication cases, not to mention military trials that lack basic fairness conditions.”

ANHRI later welcomed the release decision as “a wise step” and hoped the “Egyptian government will take other positive steps and release bloggers imprisoned under emergency law, Mossad Abu Fagr and Hani Nazeer, so that justice is served,” reports the Agence France Presse.

As Paris-based media rights group Reporters Without Borders said the trial was “designed to intimidate anyone who dares to criticize the army,” the deputy Middle East director at Human Rights Watch, Joe Stork, accused the Egyptian government of not abiding to its commitment at the Human Rights Council review in Geneva.

Stork insists, “No civilian should be tried before a military court, and no government that claims to respect human rights should be prosecuting someone solely for writing about corruption.”

While Amnesty International considered Mostafa to be “a prisoner of conscience” and had called for his liberation, Mostafa posted a blog following his release advising other bloggers to check information before posting it.

The Hurt Locker Boosts the Jordanian Film Industry

At this year’s 82nd Annual Academy Awards ceremony, The Hurt Locker scooped six wins out of nine nominations, including original screenplay, best director, and best picture, writes Gary Strauss for USA Today.

The war thriller, which follows a US army bomb disposal unit battling the endgame of the Iraq war, was based on screenwriter Mark Boal’s experience as a journalist with the army in Baghdad.

Director Kathryn Bigelow, the first woman in history to win the Oscar Award for Best Director, paid tribute to the country of Jordan in her acceptance speech, saying that she was impressed by the hospitality and support provided by the Jordanian people and the local cast members, reports Joanne Bladd for Arabian Business.

Although the film was initially set to be shot in Morocco, The Hurt Locker was later filmed in Jordan due to its similar terrain and proximity to Iraq. “They didn’t need to dress the location up, they were pretty much ready,” noted the movie’s

production consultant Fuad Khalil.

The movie has placed Jordanian producers, cast and crew, and locations under the Hollywood spotlight, says Taylor Luck of The Jordan Times. “We have seen increased attention, and there will be a lot more films coming,” states Khalil, predicting that several new films and documentaries will be filmed in the Kingdom this year.

Princess Rym Ali, whose husband Prince Ali has established the Royal Film Commission (RFC) in 2003 to promote the rising Jordanian film industry, said in an interview with Agence France Presse, “The success of any movie filmed in Jordan ... is always a plus for our kingdom, for its economy, for its tourism as well as for its budding film industry.”

Her statement rings true with The Hurt Locker’s eminence. The RFC reported that about seven million dollars were spent during filming in Jordan. Several local families had also rented their houses or property to the crew, generating extra cash flow in the process.

While 25-30 Jordanian actors were involved in the production of the film, around 300 others were employed as extras. The casting director of the movie, Lara Atalla, claims that the film has left behind a proven talent pool awaiting other major film productions.

Atalla asserts that these “so-called amateur actors” are honing their skills as young Arab professionals. “Jordan has a lot to provide the film industry with, especially in the casting field. We have a lot of high-potential actors, which many people are now seeing,” she adds.

On a similarly optimistic note, Princess Rym anticipates that the successes of The Hurt Locker will boost Jordan’s homegrown film culture. “We really would like to use this as a means to an end, to help us build a film industry,” she revealed in an interview with Sky News.

Rym also highlighted another benefit of foreign films. Apart from being a valuable learning experience for viewers, these films play “an important role in helping foreigners get to know our people, the Middle East and appreciate who we are.”

While other Oscar-winning films have been filmed in Jordan, such as Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade and Laurence of Arabia, RFC General Manager George David maintains, “We are almost certain that this is only the beginning.”

‘Sleepless in Gaza... and Jerusalem’ Spotlights Women on Both Sides

On March 1, the premiere episode of “Sleepless in Gaza... and Jerusalem” aired on YouTube, reports Joseph Mayton at Bikya Masr.

“Sleepless in Gaza...and Jerusalem,” produced by PINA TV Productions for Radiant Circle Productions, is a video diary chronicling the everyday lives of Muslim and Christian Palestinian women. According to the Jerusalem Dispatch, the series will follow four women: Ashira Ramadan, a Jerusalem-based broadcast journalist; Nagham Mohanna, a documentary filmmaker; Donna Maria Mattas, a 17-year old student and aspiring journalist studying at the Holy Family school in Gaza; and Ala’ Khayo Mkari, who works at Caritas, a Catholic humanitarian organization in Jerusalem.

The 90-part series, which the producers call “a human look at the Palestinians,” will air every day with the exception of Friday, the day of public worship in the Muslim community. According to a press release posted at the Jewish Voice for Peace’s blog The Only Democracy?, the program will be broken down into 26-minute segments. Each episode will be edited and uploaded on the same day of its filming.

The series will be directed by Ramzy Khouri and produced by Abdullah Schleifer and Walid Sababa. Schleifer is a professor of journalism at the American University in Cairo and an adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington, DC. Speaking of the aim of the program, Schleifer pointed out that its purpose “is to get around the usual rhetoric that often accompanies the talk of Palestinian issues.”

Any discussion of everyday life in Gaza and the West Bank usually carries serious political connotations about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, “Sleepless in Gaza and Jerusalem” claims to avoid promoting a particular political message. According to a description posted on the program’s YouTube page, “the intention of this series is neither rant nor rhetoric.”

Rather, the website continues, “It is ... an opportunity for all of us, who do not live in Gaza, occupied Arab Jerusalem and the rest of the West Bank, to grasp how these four young Palestinian women live out their daily lives, precisely because their lives are stories we journalists were taught almost dismissively to think of as ‘human interest’ and almost necessarily conflict driven.”

The series, documenting the women struggling with personal and career choices, will shed light on daily life in the Palestinian territories. At Bikya Masr, Joseph Mayton recounts that the producers claim the series will prove the women “can also experience moments of personal and community achievement ... even in the most difficult circumstances of siege and occupation.”

As of March 9, the trailer for the program has had more than 4,000 viewers, and there is a media campaign promoting the series. The media campaign includes a Facebook group, and aside from the videos on YouTube, episodes one and two are currently posted at Gulf News.

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