

The Layalina Review

On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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McHale's Strategy Sparks Debate

After Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale proudly announced she was “on the same page” as her predecessors Karen Hughes and James Glassman in defining a new public diplomacy strategy, UCLA professor Philip Seib expressed his disappointment in an article for The Huffington Post. He remarks, “If President Obama’s appointee can do no better than achieve consensus with these predecessors, what was the point of the election?”

Seib also argues that the Under Secretary’s approach is not proactive enough and lacks a clearly-outlined strategy. He adds that public diplomacy, since the Bush administration, has failed to show the creativity “needed to engage foreign publics consistently, not just in response to events of the moment.”

Matt Armstrong posted former Under Secretary James K. Glassman reaction to Seib’s diatribe on his blog Mountain Runner. Glassman defended McHale’s position of agreeing with her predecessors, retorting that public diplomacy is not in such a state of disarray, as Seib portrayed.

“He makes no attempt to engage with what Karen Hughes and I actually did as Under Secretaries or what we actually SAID” at the Senate hearing chaired by Senator Kaufman (D-DE), commented Glassman. The former Under Secretary also defended the creativity and validity of “Public Diplomacy 2.0,” asserting that the strategy was not only original, but successful as well.

The hearing’s purpose was to explore how “the United States’ global message can be communicate most effectively, and how achievements of the past can be used as models for future public diplomacy activities,” explains Matt Armstrong on his blog Mountain Runner.

In his opening statement, Senator Kaufman presented public diplomacy as the most important facet of US foreign policy. In attempt to draw lessons from the past and the present times, Kaufman hoped to be able to elaborate on a strategy for the future direction of public diplomacy, emphasizing the important role that technology can play in promoting the US message to the world.

Craig Hayden, Assistant Professor at the School of International Service at American University, argues on Intermap that the document reads too much as a dated conception of message management designed to counter or compete with the actions of other actors like China, Russia, and extremists groups.

Ultimately, he points out that this is a political issue that need to resolved by those with the authority and will to do so and “as some have suggested, this issue of responsibility and resources may have to be worked out by Congress.

New Media: A Force for Good or Evil?

Thousands of Muslim Facebook users clamored for the removal of an Arabic-language Facebook page created by a user with the identity of “Allah,” reports The Jerusalem Post.

The Facebook page, titled “God and Prophets,” appeared to be mocking Islam. According to Rachelle Klinger of The Jerusalem Post, the anonymous Facebook user claimed to be an atheist who “believed in no God but him/herself.”

”Allah,” posting from Abu Dhabi, claimed that Muslim prophets would connect with other Facebook users through the site, and posted altered Qur’anic verses on the page. The controversial

page allegedly attracted hundreds of thousands of followers who responded to the user’s numerous status updates.

The content of the page quickly drew the ire of many Muslims and non-Muslims across the internet. According to Andrew Hough of The Telegraph, some of the protesters called on Facebook users to boycott the social networking site until “Allah’s” page was removed. The United Arab Emirates’ Telecommunications Regulatory Authority (TRA) announced that it would ban the user from holding an internet account. The agency also ordered all internet service providers in the UAE to block the Facebook page.

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Mohammad Al-Ganem, TRA general manager, defended the decision. “TRA received numerous calls and complaints from internet users expressing their anger against unidentified people who created a site on Facebook that is offending to God, prophets, messengers, the Holy Qur’an and even to all God’s books,” Al-Ganem told Gulf News.

“You have to accept the most dirty parts of the internet if you want the beautiful part of the internet and have access to anything you want.”

Olivier Basille, President of Reporters Without Borders Belgium.

While not necessarily endorsing the content of the Facebook page, some experts warned that blocking or shutting down the page would be an affront to freedom of speech. “On the internet, you find far more cases of criticism of religion, but this is the price you pay for the freedom of the internet,” pointed out Olivier Bassile of Reporters Without Borders. “You have to accept the most dirty parts of the internet if you want the beautiful part of the internet and have access to anything you want.”

Dr. Abeer Najjar, a media researcher at the American University of Sharjah, commented that this situation may validate some governments’ attitudes toward censorship of online content in general. “The problem is that when the public asks for it, it encourages the authorities and gives them legitimacy to censor other things,” she said.

“Islam Today: Youth, and New Media,” a speaker series at Berkeley, showcased the presence of the Muslim community on the

internet. According to the event’s website, the objective of the series “is to examine how Muslim youth in the countries of the Middle East, South Asia and Southeast Asia are using new media, politics and popular culture” to “promote new agendas and develop and promote new images.”

Bushra Burney at ILLUME covered the series, which included a panel with Imam Suhaib Webb. Imam Webb spoke of his website, which has become a valuable source for Muslims living in the West. According to Webb, the site built a relationship of trust between Muslims and the clergy by promoting openness to discuss certain issues. Muslims have been able to submit questions about “taboo topics,” while scholars have used the site as a platform to analyze issues specific to Muslims living in the West.

At The Washington Post, MG Siegler posted his notes from a question and answer session between Twitter co-founder Evan Williams and Umair Haque at the South by Southwest music festival in Austin, Texas.

When speaking about Twitter’s broader goals, Williams stressed that the company’s number one principle was to be “a force for good.” According to Williams, the ultimate goal of the social media site is to facilitate the exchange of information on an international level, which will have an impact on the Middle East.

The Twitter co-founders also conversed about Twitter’s role on an international scale, claiming that it was important for Twitter to “reach the weakest signals of the world.” Speaking of Twitter’s worldwide dissemination through mobile phones, Williams observed that the Middle East is going through a period of growth. “The internet is a tidal wave that you will not be able to keep out,” he predicted.

New PD Posts Posit Progress

The Department of State recently announced the creation of several new senior positions for its public diplomacy team, reports the Washington Times. Under Secretary of State for Public

Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith McHale introduced the plan at a Senate Foreign Relations subcommittee hearing, announcing that the US “must become more proactive and less reactive.”

The new posts will all be as deputy assistant secretaries, spread across the regional bureaus within the State Department, continues the news site. One of the deputy assistant secretaries will focus on “international media support,” and be placed in the public affairs division.

“We must do a better job of listening, learn how people in other countries and cultures listen to us, understand their desires and aspirations, and provide them with information and services of value to them,” McHale stated at the hearing.

“We are taking steps to ensure that our policies and programs are informed upfront by a clear understanding of attitudes and opinions of foreign publics,” continued the Under Secretary. “In this information-saturated age, we must do a better job of framing our national narrative.”

The US Global Leadership Coalition highlights that the new officers at State will be a safeguard against the department’s tendency toward its primary mission of formal diplomacy. “These officers will be responsible for ensuring that a public diplomacy perspective is incorporated as part of senior policy deliberations,” McHale added.

“At best, foreign audiences receive muted messages. At worst, the cacophony results in no message at all.”

Rebecca Williams, the Stimson Center.

However, many foreign policy analysts wonder if the new measures are sufficient, or if the State Department can overcome serious internal management issues.

According to Kim Andrew Elliot, a recent inspector general report found that the public affairs department at State had “serious problems with morale, staffing, communication and leadership.”

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has made a concerted effort to overhaul the State Department during the first year of her tenure, asserts the Washington Post.

“We have had other secretaries of state who have cared deeply for the institution,” Undersecretary of State Patrick F. Kennedy told the Washington Post, “[But] none who have done as much internal outreach.”

Mark Dillen at the Foreign Policy Association’s Public Diplomacy blog argues nonetheless that the new public diplomacy positions at State are “the first good news in quite a while for State’s public diplomacy officials.”

Dillen points to McHale’s use of the “Pakistan Plan” model for further public diplomacy initiatives, stressing that “there’s a sense that the cadre of [public diplomacy] professionals... may finally get the authority and resources they need to do that job.” The Pakistan Plan is a broad, far-reaching approach involving significantly expanded media outreach, multi-lingual hotlines for the US Embassy there, in-person meetings with Pakistanis and other non-official contact with Pakistani citizens.

Yet, some remain skeptical as regards the US carrying out a successful outreach campaign in Pakistan. Many flaws remain in terms of cohesive efforts carried out. Six Pakistani lawmakers who were asked to submit to a full body scan at Ronald Reagan National Airport protested it was “an insult to their dignity,” and turned around to fly directly back to Pakistan, according to the Boston Globe.

The officials were coming to the US following an invitation by Secretary Clinton during her much-publicized trip to Pakistan last October.

“If the aim of such public diplomacy is to counter Pakistanis’ anti-American paranoia, then it is a grave mistake to underestimate how deep-rooted that wariness can be,” the Boston Globe editorial continues. “It would have been easy for the State Department

to arrange a special screening.”

Budget Insight, a Stimson Center blog on the financial aspect of national security, emphasizes that outreach to foreign publics is not currently coordinated at a national level, despite the State Department’s claim to the role.

“Perhaps more importantly, the purpose of public diplomacy in relation to our foreign policy and national security objectives is undefined,” Rebecca Williams writes on Budget Insight. “At best, foreign audiences receive muted messages. At worst, the cacophony results in no message at all.”

The Future of Public Diplomacy

Former Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs James K. Glassman argued for Foreign Policy Magazine that the Obama administration relies too heavily on the popularity of President Barack Obama for the success of its public diplomacy strategy.

While Glassman acknowledges that it has been successful to some extent, he remarks, “Winning the war of ideas means [...] putting together carefully calibrated actions and initiatives that together make up public diplomacy, which is often wrongly conflated with old-fashioned public relations.”

As he deplores that current officials no longer take the role of public diplomacy in foreign policy seriously, the former Under Secretary comments that it should be considered a national security issue. America’s popularity is not the main issue at stake when elaborating public diplomacy strategies; it should rather focus on isolating and reducing the threats that violent extremism poses to America’s interests and national security. Citing “Public Diplomacy 2.0”, which entails communicating America’s policies, values and culture to the people of another nation through the internet, Glassman notes that it also allowed to bridge generation gaps and enabled the US to act as a “as facilitator and convener.” According to him, the most urgent task of US public diplomacy today is to dispel the negative stereotype that

the US is a danger to Muslim societies.

“For the immediate future, our job in public diplomacy is to promote this accurate narrative in everything we do,” recommends Glassman. Emphasizing America’s values -- concepts of pluralism, freedom, and opportunity that run counter to the extremists’ ideology can advance US objectives.

However, the answer to America’s global engagement strategy may lie in a better strategic communication as discussed during the “New Caucus to Probe Strategic Communication, Public Diplomacy”, according to Matt Armstrong on his blog Mountain Runner. The new Pentagon report went into details describing how Pentagon and

“For the immediate future, our job in public diplomacy is to promote this accurate narrative in everything we do.”

James K. Glassman, former Under Secretary of State.

State Department will collaborate in drafting a public diplomacy strategy.

The Capitol Hill caucus focused on strategic communication and public diplomacy, with the aim to study the latest government efforts in these domains, according to a congressional source.

According to Fawzia Sheikh for Inside the Pentagon, social media are pivotal in the future of strategic communication. The author remarks, “Misinformation about US actions can be quickly disseminated to millions, damaging our country’s reputation when not vigorously countered in a timely fashion.” The internet allows reaching out to everyone in a timely manner, overcoming the temporal and spatial barriers.

Reps. Adam Smith (D-WA) and Mac Thornberry (R-TX) who headed the caucus commented that for foreign audiences to better understand America's objectives and message, the United States must be able to understand and engage these audiences.

In stating so, they called for a creative and original approach in strategic communication and public diplomacy strategies to do so through the internet so it no longer is the safe haven of extremists. However, the lack of tools and resources were cited as the main impediment in achieving these goals.

"The Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy Caucus held a preliminary briefing discussing budget-related issues in November, according to the source familiar with the caucus," wrote Sheikh. The author added that according to a source close to the caucus, future meetings may examine the difference between public diplomacy and strategic communication and the corresponding roles of stakeholders, as well as adversarial use of new media, including a discussion on how Al-Qaeda and the Taliban use YouTube and Google.

The role of business and technology in strategic communication and public diplomacy may also show up on a future meeting agenda as caucus members "may probe previous efforts in this area like the Voice of America and the Broadcasting Board of Governors, in addition to past legislation and reports on how to reform strategic communication."

While Helle Dale at The Heritage Foundation praises strategic overview of the government's public diplomacy and strategic communication assets and functions, she deplores the fact that it had to wait until now and the lack of precision in the strategy's direction. She explains, "Although the Obama Administration has finally produced several long-awaited documents on public diplomacy and strategic communication, these documents do little to reveal what the Administration is planning to actually do."

When on March 10, Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy Judith McHale testified before the US Senate Foreign Relations Committee, presenting the State Department's roadmap to "US

Public Diplomacy: Strengthening US Engagement with the World," Dale remarks that McHale did a comprehensive job of identifying the global challenges.

Among the challenges she identified are, "Extremists" with "sophisticated media strategies," who are increasingly adept at shaping the narrative and recruiting new followers, [...] Iran's cultural centers and political linkages influencing key audiences."

However, Dale remains skeptical of the State Department's ability to address these challenges, given the lack of budget and authority. She remarks however that "in light of the Obama Administration's stated intentions to focus on public diplomacy—and indeed in light of the President's personal interest in the subject—there is room for a long-overdue debate on public diplomacy."

Obama's Outreach to the Muslim World in Upheaval

Nine months after President Barack Obama's promise to restore America's image among Muslims and in the Arab world in Cairo, many are disappointed by this "new beginning," argues Ross Colvin for Reuters. Many people across the Middle East feel that the American president failed to deliver on his promises.

"We were optimistic, but there were no results," said Yacoub Hussein, a Kuwaiti public servant. The main source of disappointment stems from the administration's difficulties with the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Arabs and Muslims alike are skeptical over the fact that Washington will ever pressure Israel into halting the settlements.

This very skepticism is eroding America's credibility and fueling anti-American sentiment, according to Elizabeth Kennedy for The Huffington Post. It also means that Arab countries are less likely to engage with the US on issues, such as Iran, if they get nothing in return. "A lot of the Arab countries already in the last year saw that there wasn't much delivery from the US on the Israeli side," noted Paul Salem,

director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut, "So why engage, why compromise, from their point of view?"

However, Obama's aides protested that scientific, educational and technological initiatives were launched after the Cairo speech, points out Colvin for Reuters. "Muslims were expecting Obama to represent something new because of what he represents in American politics. They haven't seen that. What they've really seen is a return to traditional diplomacy," said Michele Dunne of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Fairly or unfairly, many Muslims perceive Obama as being soft on Israel while pressuring Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to return to peace talks. Jordanian political analyst Oreib Rentawi said that Arabs do not believe there is true disagreement between the United States and its longtime ally, Israel.

"Why engage, why compromise, from their point of view?"

Paul Salem, Director of the Carnegie Middle East Center in Beirut.

"Arabs consider what is taking place now as a summer cloud or a storm in a tea cup," Rentawi told the AP. Likewise, in Egypt, a column in the Al-Gomhuria newspaper expressed doubt that Israel would face any repercussions for its actions. As the US president is expected in Jakarta, where he will deliver a speech highlighting Indonesia as both a Muslim-majority country and one of the world's biggest democracies, American Muslims' hopes are also dwindling, according to The Hill.

"He raised a lot of expectations with his very positive rhetorical outreach in the early months of his presidency," Ibrahim Hooper, spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), told The Hill. "Unfortunately, we haven't seen that followed up with concrete policies."

In December, the CAIR sent a letter to Obama, asking the president to address an “alarming level of anti-Islam hate in our nation,” but to date has received no response, according to Hooper.

Richard Grenell, who was the US spokesman at the United Nations under the Bush administration, concurs that Obama’s shortcomings mainly stem from the stalemate that has come to characterize the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Some believe that a more concrete engagement with Muslim communities at home, such as visiting a mosque or talking to leaders of Muslim communities, is essential to build trust within the Muslim community in the United States.

However, it is not all doom and gloom as Scott Lucas remarks for Enduring America that the Obama administration has taken the correct steps in turning engagement with the Muslim world into a top priority on its agenda. He argues that this administration’s public diplomacy initiatives have tried to mollify Muslim communities with token appointments, visits, and powerful rhetoric while developing a broad strategy.

Advocating a more sustained effort, Lucas believes that while public diplomacy symbols are often effective in launching engagement, in recent years they have been ineffective in communicating with the Muslim world. Dialogue at a grassroots level and incorporating the religious perspectives and aspirations, of religious leaders and civic activists into the Obama administration’s foreign policy vision are vital for its success.

Lucas reiterates that if the US officials are to find a common ground, they must recognize communication and practice social dialogue with allies and foes alike in the Muslim world.

Yemen Censures Two Major Pan-

Arab Media Networks

The government of Yemen recently raided two prominent pan-Arab TV networks, Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, confiscating broadcasting equipment and subjecting staff to interrogation and detention, reports the Associated Press. According to the AP, the Yemeni Information Minister Hassan Lozy declared that the action was because a response to the fact that “[the networks] had no license to operate their broadcasting equipment,” an argument that is disputed by the both companies.

This incident occurred in the midst of difficult political and economic conditions that have been threatening the fragile unity of the country, jeopardizing as well the position of President Ali Abdullah Saleh. Since 9/11, Yemen has emerged as a particularly sensitive country for US national security interests, due to a strong Al-Qaeda presence in its territories. The Saleh government has tried to gain economic and military supports, as well as forging stronger ties with the West in cracking down on Al-Qaeda, reports the Los Angeles Times.

The Yemeni government continues to battle unrest and secessionist uprisings in its southern provinces, where tensions have been high since the country’s civil war nearly two decades ago. Protests in the south erupted again recently, resulting in a forceful crackdown by the government and the deaths of at least ten people, according to the Associated Press. Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya have been persistent in covering the incident, to the embarrassment of the Yemeni government.

Hammoud Mounasser of the Agence France-Presse writes that the suspension of the networks’ operations was intended to “cover up the heavy-handed methods in the south.” cites a minority parliamentarian, Fouad Dahana, who stated, “The authorities are trying to kill the witnesses... of a crime because Al-Arabiya and Al-Jazeera are the best witnesses of [the Saleh Government’s] actions in Yemen.” Saba News Agency, the media outlet of the Yemeni government, blamed Al-Jazeera for unfair coverage of the situation in the southern provinces,

claiming that that was the reason for suspending Al-Jazeera’s operations. Saba quoted “unnamed ruling party source” as requesting the local Al-Jazeera bureau “to reconsider their programs and adhere to objectivity when reporting in Yemen.”

According to Saba, the source also stated, “Yemen welcomes the media and broadcasting sets but on condition they operate without violating nation law, igniting chaos or reporting falsehoods about any part of the country.” The news agency condemned Al-Jazeera for showing archived photos of previous incidents, hence claiming that the network was purposefully attempting to inflate the magnitude of the situation in south Yemen. No explanation has been given for the shutdown of Al-Arabiya.

Proponents of freedom of the press have protested the actions of the government in Yemen. “The Yemeni Journalists Syndicate has [held] a sit-in

“Yemen welcomes the media and broadcasting sets but on condition they operate without violating nation law.”

Unnamed Yemeni government source.

at its headquarters in Sana’a in protest to the security raid on Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya offices and [the confiscation] of equipment,” reports News Yemen. Member of Parliament Abdul Razak Al-Hajri called on parliament to question the minister of information over the incident.

Yemen bureau chiefs of Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya addressed the sit-in in front of a banner that read: “The storming of Al-Jazeera offices. An act of barbarianism and hooliganism” reported the International Press Institute.

To Build or Not to Build?

Israeli forces sealed off the West Bank and massed riot squads around Jerusalem's Old City and Arab neighborhoods during Muslim weekly prayers last week, facing down Palestinian anger over Jewish settlement expansion, reports Reuters. These latest clashes occurred a week after Vice President Joe Biden condemned Israel for approving new building just as Washington was pushing its key Middle East ally to re-launch peace talks with the Palestinians.

As demonstrators burned US and Israeli flags, Khalil Al-Hayya, a leader of the Hamas movement which rules Gaza, urged Hamas's rival, West Bank-based Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, to reverse his decision to engage in "proximity talks" with Israel through US mediators after a hiatus of 15 months.

Reuters adds that a State Department spokesman said Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by phone that the plan to build 1,600 new homes near Jerusalem was "a deeply negative signal about Israel's approach to the bilateral relationship ... and had undermined trust and confidence in the peace process."

Furthermore, according to The Guardian, the Vice President's visit exposed Israel's "stubbornness" in building the settlements, regardless of the implications. The news site points out that the settlers and their sympathizers are entrenched in every relevant nook and cranny of Israel's bureaucracy and security establishment.

The Jewish Daily Forward remarks that the dispute between Israel and the United States over building plans in East Jerusalem has left some supporters of Israel "with a bitter aftertaste." Besides the administration's admonition, the question of whether Israeli policies adversely affect America's strategic interests in the region was raised.

The news site comments, "An even more charged suggestion received a public airing during the latest crisis, namely that Israeli policies toward the Palestinians endanger not only America's standing in the Muslim world, but also its war

efforts and even the lives of its soldiers."

Yediot Aharonot set the stage March 11 with a front-page quote attributed to Biden from a closed-door conversation he held with Israeli officials. "What you're doing here undermines the security of our troops who are fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. That endangers us and it endangers regional peace," Biden was reported to have said, regarding the Ramat Shlomo plans, according to the Israeli daily. The Vice President's office declines to comment on this statement.

In a March 16 hearing in the Senate Armed Services Committee, Petraeus, made a related, if considerably more measured, assertion, remarks The Jewish Daily Forward. Petraeus allegedly declared that the Israeli-Palestinian tensions "have an enormous effect on the strategic context in which we operate in Central Command area of responsibility." He further stressed that terrorists are exploiting the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in order to mobilize support.

The President's top adviser David Axelrod also commented in an interview with ABC News that the recent approval to build new settlements during the Vice President's visit "seemed calculated to undermine" the so-called proximity talks going on between the Palestinians and the Israelis.

The issue, Axelrod added, is a "flare point throughout the region" and puts US interests at risk. "It is important for our own security that we move forward and resolve this very difficult issue." However, Rep. Eric Cantor, the House minority whip, argued that America's real problems in the Middle East are the spread of nuclear weapons and of Islamic extremism.

While other concurred with Rep. Eric Cantor, the relationship between Israel and has reached what some call a "crisis" point, offering a bleak prospect into future developments in the peace process for now.

This Week in Internet Censorship

Internet censorship has reached new highs in countries under authoritarian regimes, according to a study recently

released by Reporters Without Borders, reports the Associated Press. The study highlighted Iran, Tunisia, and China as some of the worst perpetrators.

Other countries in the Middle East mentioned in the report were Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen were also mentioned in the report. Iran received particularly strong criticism for its "increasingly sophisticated" censorship and filtering tactics, especially in the wake of the country's controversial presidential election, continues the Associated Press.

"Since [the presidential elections last summer], censorship has reached unprecedented proportions [in Iran]," the report noted, according to Arabian Business. "The Islamic Republic of Iran has become the largest prison in the Middle East... for journalists and netizens," the Reporters Without Borders study continued.

Indeed, Iran recently arrested thirty more online activists in the country, claiming that they were backed financially by the United States, reports CNN. The state-owned media in Iran claimed that the individuals had ties to Voice of America and Radio Farda, another US-funded radio station.

Joanne Bladd for Arabian Business points out that Bahrain and the UAE are also named in the Reporters Without Borders paper as a part of the "under surveillance" category. Although the countries were not criticized as harshly as Iran, Bladd remarks that they "run the risk of being branded an internet enemy in the next annual report."

Saudi Arabia was highlighted as "one of the most repressive countries" when it comes to internet censorship, Bladd continues. The Saudi government has blocked hundreds of thousands of websites, placed hidden cameras in internet cafés, and required café owners to make customer lists available to officials.

The study by Reporters Without Borders comes amidst the latest controversy in Egypt, in which a blogger there wrote about police brutality in Cairo on the internet, according to the BBC. The blogger, Wael Abbas, was sentenced to six months in prison, but the conviction was later thrown out. The case has drawn the interest of internet and

democracy watchdogs around the world.

Ahmed Mostafa, another convicted Egyptian blogger, was also released recently after the United Nations published “a scathing report” and Egypt received “international condemnation by human rights groups,” reports Truth

“By not speaking out, the Obama administration is sending a message that the United States accepts [this] travesty of democracy.”

Marina Ottaway, Director of the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Out. Mostafa’s trial was especially significant because although he is an Egyptian citizen and a civilian, he would have been tried in a military court, whose rulings cannot be overturned..

Hadeel Al-Shalchi, a Cairo-based writer for the Associated Press, stresses that the fate of contentious Egyptian bloggers is not equal. “Those bloggers with better connections, more contacts in the West, or those with big family names, while severely harassed, can continue to blog and debate online,” he writes for The National.

“The internet has certainly opened the eyes of Egypt to the outside world,” Al-Shalchi continues. “As technology grows, [young people] will play an increasing role in how the world views Egypt.”

This view is reinforced by another recent study, published by the Egyptian government, which observed that internet use in the country has ballooned to almost 15 million users in the past ten years, according to Bikya Masr. But the report also highlighted that the absence

of internet infrastructure and low literacy rates are “important obstacles facing the electronic media in Egypt.”

Truth Out points to an opinion piece by Marina Ottaway of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. In response to the crackdown on bloggers in Egypt and the wider MENA region, Ottaway asserted that the Obama administration must take action.

“The normal tools of the democracy promotion kit... are unlikely to make a difference,” Ottaway wrote. “By not speaking out, the Obama administration is sending a message that the United States accepts the travesty of democracy that [the current political climate in Egypt] represents.”

A New Dawn for Democracy in the Middle East

Government and media experts gathered to discuss the findings of a recent Asda’a Burson-Marsteller Arab youth survey, reports Rania Moussly for Gulfnews.

The survey interviewed 2,000 Arab youth, aged 18 through 24, about their beliefs and attitudes about various topics, from democracy to their favorite leisure activities. The survey included participants from nine countries: Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Kuwait, Jordan, and Lebanon.

In an interview for Arabian Business, Mohammed Basri, a 21 year old accountant-in-training in the United Arab Emirates, spoke about some of the points targeted in the survey, such as the popularity of the iPhone and his personal response to President Obama’s speech in Cairo. “The thing is, it doesn’t really matter what I say or think, because nobody is actually interested in the voice of Arab youths anymore,” he lamented.

However, it appears that the tides are changing. Many experts are intrigued by the results of the survey, which show that many Arab youth place a premium on democracy. According to

Shane McGinley at Arabian Business, 99 percent of Kuwaiti participants and 96 percent of respondents in the UAE considered living in a democratic country to be ‘very important’ or ‘somewhat important’ to them.

Karen Hughes, vice-chair of Burson-Marsteller and former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, spoke optimistically about the survey’s findings. “All young people across the world want to be heard and want to play a part in their society. These are not American ambitions, they are universal human rights and universal desires,” she stated.

However, some are questioning exactly what kind of democracy the Arab youth envision. Not necessarily a Western-style democracy, according to Sultan Sooud Al-Qassemi. “I don’t think they meant democracy per se, as in they want to go to the ballet [sic] boxes. Democracy is a byword for accountability and having a fair shot at life,” the chairman of the UAE chapter of the Young Arab Leaders told Arabian Business.

Paradoxically, a majority of the survey’s participants expressed satisfaction with their respective governments. High satisfaction rates were recorded in the Gulf region; 81 percent of respondents in the UAE and 98 percent of those from Saudi Arabia believed that their countries are “moving in the right direction.”

“I think the fact that young people both say that they want to live in a democratic country but also say that they are by-and-large very happy with the direction of their countries means the leaders are doing a good job of involving people and listening to them,” Hughes surmised.

Egyptian and Lebanese youth, however, recorded lower rates of satisfaction with their governments. Hughes speculated that the results in Egypt and Lebanon were most likely connected with increased economic dissatisfaction.

Some experts were hesitant to view the survey’s results in an entirely positive light. Many Arab youth are connected to the television and the internet, often at the expense of other activities. Another finding from the survey indicated that issues such as the rise of extreme Islamist movements and international

conflicts ranked at the bottom of a list of twenty priority concerns.

Najla Al-Awadi, deputy chief executive officer of Dubai Media Incorporated and Member of the UAE Federal National Council, viewed this apathy as a hurdle in Arab societies, many of which have disproportionately youthful populations. "If the youth aren't aware of [the problems] then we need to worry about their apathy or lack of awareness about serious issues facing our region," she added.

For the present, election turnout and voting results may be a more accurate indicator for the future of democracy in the Middle East. In an article for Gulf News, Mohammad Akef Jamal stressed the importance of the 2010 Iraqi parliamentary elections.

"The outcome of the Iraqi elections is crucial in outlining the future of Iraq as a country. The outcome is also exceptionally important on a number of other levels," Jamal asserts. Speaking of the greater scope of the election's importance, he stated. "Regionally, the expected and demanded change in Iraq is the only route towards the country's stability; hence the map of new balances in the region will be drawn."

Although the voter turnout was approximately 62 percent, the elections were marred by bombings, which killed dozens of Iraqis and prevented many citizens from going to the polls. The violence surrounding the elections presents a sobering picture of the realities of democracy building.

Ultimately, Karen Hughes remains hopeful about the future of democracy in the Middle East. "[The leaders] are beginning to make people feel that they do have a voice in the process and that their opinions are being heard," she observed.

Middle East is Auspicious for Media Investments

The Middle East has been identified as being among the fastest growing markets for the multi-billion audio

visual industry which, in spite of the troubling economic environment last year, has seen no overall contraction in spending, reports Al-Bawaba.

"The future looks bright for the audiovisual industry with the market in the Middle East and Africa expected to be worth more than \$3 billion by 2012," said Alex Heuff, Exhibition Director of PALME Middle East, the region's only trade event dedicated to professional lighting, audio, music, entertainment, audio visual and systems integration industry.

Accordingly, Heuff agreed that growth is being propelled by displays and audio visual conferencing equipment, streaming media, webcasting, wireless connections and software. Hotspots include digital signage, video conferencing and command and control facilities.

Indeed, investors and experts emphasized that the Arab region has great potential in media fields stressing that investments in information-related industries can create millions of job opportunities, according to Trading Markets.

"By unlocking the creativity of your people, you can diversify your economy... provide millions of jobs for a rising generation... and give the Arab people a global voice and influence commensurate with your importance," Murdoch on Tuesday told the opening session of the three-day Abu Dhabi Media Summit which brought together about 400 media representatives from around the world, including 40 chairmen and 80 CEOs of major media corporations.

He continued that News Corporation also invested in Rotana, one of the world's largest producers of Arab music.

"We are partnering with Rotana for something more ambitious: To tap into Arab talent and ultimately produce original Arab content for markets both here and abroad," Murdoch stated. Murdoch announced that his company was expanding its presence in the region by announcing a strategic partnership between Fox International Channels and Abu Dhabi's twofour54.

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