

# The Layalina Review

## On Public Diplomacy And Arab Media



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### The Talented Mr. Furlong

Pentagon's efforts to influence foreign public opinion have come under close scrutiny following allegations that the Department of Defense's (DoD) information operations are to be likened to propaganda, notes Sharon Weinberger for AOL News. Defense Secretary Robert Gates recently ordered a review of the military's information operations to examine budget allocation and the nature of the operations.

The review comes amid allegations that a Pentagon civilian employee, Michael D. Furlong, would have used \$25 million in funds from the agency's program against roadside bombs to hire private contractors (many of them retired military, CIA and other intelligence specialists) for information operations in Afghanistan – ostensibly authorized by top US military commanders, reports Walter Pincus for The Washington Post.

However, officials claim Mr. Furlong's covert network might have been improperly financed by diverting money from a program designed to merely gather information about the region.

The Pentagon has reportedly launched a broad "psychological operations" campaign, as part of the information operations, to counter the Taliban advances in the propaganda war. The campaign includes taking down their websites and jamming radio stations.

Weinberger remarks that despite the controversies surrounding the Pentagon's information operations, such operations have considerably increased as part of DoD's aggressive strategy to counter extremist propaganda, with a budget amounting to \$528 million for fiscal year 2010.

She points out that these information

operations now receive names as military operations do "to coordinate various activities and ensure steady funding," as well as to provide greater transparency. The information operations allegedly entail efforts "rooted in the truth," such as websites promoting America's military message abroad and countering misinformation.

According to Retired Admiral Stephen Pietropaoli, the former chief of information for the Navy, "part of the problem in recent years has been the lack of clarity among the missions of public affairs, strategic communications and information operations."

US Army General David Petraeus, the head of Central Command, has been one of the military's most vocal proponents of aggressive information operations. Earlier this month, he told Congress that they are essential to the success of military operations on the ground in Iraq and Afghanistan.

However, David Ignatius argues for The Washington Post that US military's mobilization for this war, which is often described by the "oxymoronic phrase 'information operations,' should not be casually dismissed as common operations." Warning about the impact it could have on America's image, Ignatius stresses, "The United States should be careful about encouraging, in effect, the militarization of information – and it should be especially cautious when these efforts bleed into the intelligence world."

Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, criticized information operations in an article in the Joint Force Quarterly naming the entire venture a "cottage industry" that is questionable and poorly supervised. He added that the words 'information operations' are more or less euphemisms for propaganda, bringing an "aura of respectability" to the industry.

Mullen construed, "The problem is that it's a slippery slope, because the information

environment is so instantaneously global today.. You put something out there and it goes worldwide in a flash, making each influence activity suspect to a much wider and more skeptical audience." Ignatius concurs with Adm. Mullen adding that the internet is rife with professed experts offering their expertise in everything spanning from "cultural engagement" to "clandestine operations."

"It's a world of PowerPoint presentations about how to spread pro-American messages while rebutting and demoralizing the enemy," scolds Ignatius. The other problems stem from the lack of distinction in the operations carried out, with psy-ops, reporting on local

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“atmospherics,” public affairs and other smaller programs, all lumped up together.

Gates concluded, “There are broader problems in terms of oversight in these important areas that need to be corrected, and that’s what I’m focused on.”

*“You put something out there and it goes worldwide in a flash, making each influence activity suspect to a much wider and more skeptical audience.”*

*Admiral Mike Mullen,  
Chairman of the Joint Chiefs  
of Staff.*

The chief of media operations for Strategic Command, Steve Curry, states that the budget of The Warfare Center-Furlong’s base- is relatively small. He adds that the center also gets funding from external sources from across the Defense Department, the Joint Forces, Special Operations, Air Combat and the Army’s 1st Information Commands.

Between 2006 and 2008, Central Command alone had 172 contracts worth \$270 million just for information operations in Iraq, according to a Defense Department inspector general report released last September.

Purchases of products and services made through major contracts included “military analysts, development of television commercials and documentaries, focus group and polling services, television air time, posters, banners, and billboards,” the inspector general reported. Smaller individual purchases under information-operations programs included “magazine publishing and printing services, newspaper dissemination, television and radio airtime, text messaging services,

internet services and novelty items.”

While it has been widely reported that the CIA and the military are attacking operatives of Al-Qaeda and others through unmanned, remote-controlled drone strikes, some American officials confessed to being somewhat troubled that Mr. Furlong seemed to be running an “off-the-books spy operation,” according to The New York Times. The officials said they are not sure who condoned and supervised his work.

Even in a region of the world known to inspire conspiracy theories, Mr. Furlong’s story stands out. At times, his operation featured a mysterious American company run by retired Special Operations officers and a CIA figure who was involved in some of the most high-profile cases of the agency, including the Iran-Contra affair.

Government officials have also expressed the possibility that Mr. Furlong might have channeled money away from a program intended to provide American commanders with information about Afghanistan’s social and tribal landscape, and toward secret efforts to hunt militants on both sides of the country’s porous border with Pakistan.

In any case, the most salient concern arising out of this story is the lack of regulation and supervision of information operations and the contractors who lead them.

## The Rise of Cultural Diplomacy

Laura McGinnis discusses on her public diplomacy blog ManIC the intricacies of balancing foreign policy interests with cultural diplomacy within the broader framework of public diplomacy. She remarks, “The main goals of US public diplomacy are to promote foreign policy and national interests, protect national security, and create harmonious relationships between the United States and citizens of other countries.”

Commenting on the recent strategic public diplomacy approach advocated by Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Judith A. McHale, the author adds that the document pays to

little heed to cooperation and dialogue with foreign audiences and publics; A gap that can be bridged through cultural diplomacy if adequately implemented.

In the week before McGinnis’s post, Neal M. Rosendorf, assistant professor of US International History at Long Island University, argued that cultural diplomacy is pivotal to US foreign policy, having a definite repercussion on the country’s image and foreign audiences perception of America. However, McGinnis points out that Rosendorf failed to address that the US government allocates considerably more money to the nation’s military budget than it does to its diplomacy budget, indicating a lack of appreciation for the benefits can be reaped from practicing skillful cultural diplomacy.

Among other things, Rosendorf suggested as a solution to increase funding for cultural public diplomacy initiatives, which could improve assuaging concerns regarding US policies among foreign publics. Rosendorf advocates that a better understanding of America’s culture allows for establishing better communication channels in explaining foreign policy objectives and highlighting common interests.

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

*Rebecca Williams, the  
Stimson Center.*

Judith McHale’s recent strategy emphasized the salience of people-to-people relationships that can be greatly enhanced through building cultural bridges.

However, McGinnis remarks that Rosendorf’s cultural diplomacy strategies focus “on making the US more open and accessible to foreign

publics, [while] McHale emphasizes exporting the US message abroad.”

Linda Constant asserts on The Huffington Post that cultural diplomacy can contribute to the progress of culture in and of itself. Referring to the speech of former Under Secretary James K. Glassman titled “The Limits of Cultural Diplomacy, and a Way Forward” and presented at a conference on “Culture’s Purpose and the Work of Public Diplomacy” at American University this past fall, she concurs that the issue of personal perspectives interferes with the capacity of understanding one another.

However, Constant surmises, “With the continuing exponential proliferation of communication across borders, what now constitutes true cultural diplomacy are the elements of exchange and mutuality.” She adds, “In today’s vast networks of information and communication, diplomacy of any kind is ultimately dis-served by being contextualized in a construct of ‘us’ and ‘them.’”

She emphasizes the role that cultural diplomacy plays in connecting with people, enhancing global engagement campaigns with foreign audiences and making America more appealing, if not more popular to them. Constant ponders on the role of modern technology and social media, highlighting the key role they have in facilitating communication.

“Considering the interconnectivity of much of the world today, cultural diplomacy has in many ways become an inherent aspect of global communication – if one is inclined to have a successful experience with it, anyhow,” she says.

Consequently, communication has reached a point today where it provides populations with a capacity to connect, exchange and share their culture, eventually leading to a “cultural progression,” whether it is abroad or in the US.

## Religiously Watched

Despite the strict regulations imposed on TV programming by ministries of information, an increasing number of religious television stations are

being launched, many of which are proving to be extremely popular, reports the Kipp Report. The news site argues that the liberalization of broadcasting rules and proliferation of media zones has led to the explosive growth of free-to-air satellite television.

Although Western shows and imported Arabic channels have fared very well in the region, religious programming, mainly exported by the Saudis, remains in high demand. The ‘halal’ way of life has found its niche in the region and is ever expanding beyond the borders of the Arab world. For marketers interested in the halal consumerism, mainstream channels like MBC offer a large audience, although not an exclusively Muslim one.

“Clearly, we are living in the heart of the marketing segmentation and customization era, but when we talk about Muslims in the Arab world, the mainstream approach [is] the norm, with few exceptions when it comes to non-Muslim Arabs or expats,” says Mazen Hayek, MBC’s group director of marketing. “The halal lifestyle is a given in the Arab world... being culturally relevant and sensitive to tradition is key – at all times.”

However, airing religious programming is not restricted to religious channels. Broadcasting channels, deemed secular by nature, such as Dream TV or Future TV, are aware of their capacity to attract large audiences and consequently feature religious shows or Islamic programs, especially during Ramadan.

The region’s first Islamic satellite channel, Iqra, was launched in 1998 by Jeddah-based Arabic Television and Radio (ART). Although the programming is in Arabic, English subtitles are available on most programs in order to extend its reach to non-Arabic speaking audiences.

Broadcasters have become very savvy and cater to their audiences accordingly. The Kipp Report explains that, for example, ‘Halal tv’ is treated differently according to the country of broadcast; while very austere Qranic channels such as Al-Majd are very popular in Saudi Arabia, and 4Shabab Islamic music channel is in high demand in other parts of the Middle East such as Egypt.

“There is a segment [in Saudi Arabia]

that avoids watching satellite channels,” says Antonio Boulos, CEO of Aegis Media Middle East, “The key to engaging this conservative segment, which shuns music and Western programming, is not necessarily through Islamic shows alone but by adhering strictly to Islamic values.”

Although all the channels under the Al-Majd brand follow Islamic values, some of the programs stray out of the Islamic topic. The company produces the entire content of its programming, from educational programs and documentaries to cooking shows and children’s cartoons.

*“The first thing we teach our children is ‘Allab’. The second is fighting the Americans.”*

*Abu Ahmed, Co-founder of Al-Samoud magazine.*

There are nonetheless some strict regulations to adhere to in carrying business with the broadcasting company. Advertisers wishing to reach the audience served by Al-Majd need to adhere to the channel’s Islamic guidelines, which prohibit music and female models, but allow natural sounds and female voice-overs.

With the Arab world accounting for twenty percent of Muslims worldwide, more TV channels targeting specific Muslim ethnic groups are also coming up, opening new avenues for marketers to consider in their media mix. One Islamic channel that produces its own content and enjoys a strong viewership is the London-based Islam Channel.

“In the UK, government statistics show that, among the community channels, we have more viewers than [all] 30 put together,” says the channel’s CEO, Mohamed Ali. “We reach half of those reached by the BBC.” Islam Channel represents a growing trend among broadcasters that target Muslims – moving beyond conventional

theological and religious content.

He adds, “The programming of Islam Channel reflects many aspects of the halal lifestyle, mostly in the Western context,” with the popularity of the shows and their preachers growing.

According to Asharq Alawsat, a prominent Muslim televangelists, activists, and preachers in the Arab world, Amr Khaled was chosen as the 13th most influential person in the world by Time Magazine in 2007. His television programs are famed throughout the Arab world, and he is known as a proponent of a moderate and tolerant brand of Islam.

Claiming to be a reformer before a preacher, Khaled remarks that the youth in the Arab world may be facing a variety of challenges and may consequently be confused. He suggests on his shows that the Prophet would be a perfect example to emulate and that he should remain a spiritual guide to them. Khaled adds that the success of his show, Mujjadidun, lies in its ability to have presented a new way of thinking about charitable and voluntary work, while addressing issues in an engaging manner.

“I can say that the Mujaddidun program managed to walk a difficult line between presenting an entertaining and engaging show and present a righteous and reformative message,” he comments. He adds that he hopes his show will be able to inspire young people in Egypt to channel their energy and frustrations brought by the precariousness of social conditions into something productive.

## The Glossy Taliban

The conflict between the Taliban and their enemies has now spread to a war of words, comments Robert Fisk of The Independent. The extremist group is extending their reach through glossy magazines in a “hearts and minds” offensive.

The Taliban attach great importance to these tools to promote their soft power and influence, and the magazines are “in eloquent Arabic, Pashto and Dari, and they pour derision on American and NATO forces in Afghanistan... professionally produced magazines,

carrying stories of the Taliban’s own “martyrdom” operations and the names of its dead fighters,” according to Fisk.

The group is also using audio and video recordings, flyers and handouts, so-called “night letters” (letters with warnings or messages posted overnight), newspapers, journals and magazines, and books. The Taliban also uses FM radio stations in Pakistan broadcasting

*“Extremist groups have these close environments and spaces they can create where the people who come to consume the material they are producing are already interested or sympathetic.”*

*Terry Pattar, Jane’s Strategic Advisory Services.*

to promote anti-US propaganda. In some areas, cell phone ring tones of Taliban anthems can even be heard.

The latest front page of “Al-Samoud,” the Taliban’s monthly Arabic-language magazine, is adorned with photographs of a grim-faced General Stanley McChrystal, the US commander in Afghanistan. Inside, an editorial asks: “Is the battle of Marja as decisive as they claim?” while an article on casualties is accompanied by a colored photograph of a British military convoy passing through the village of Wootton Bassett.

Abu Ahmed, one of the creators of the magazine, claims he is simply exercising his right to freedom of speech. Fisk remarks that “Al-Samoud” and the Taliban’s three other magazines in Pashto

and Dari – the bi-monthly Morchel (“Trench”), Saraq (“Flame”) and Shahamak (“Dignity”) – are clearly produced on modern printing presses, although Abu Ahmed will not reveal their location.

The authors “reveal two new characteristics: an almost obsessive attention to detail, and the new name of the Taliban. The group now calls itself the ‘Islamic Emirate.’” Abu Ahmed claims the news printed in the magazines is entirely factual, and should be regarded as a credible source of information. “Al-Samoud” describes itself as “the Islamic monthly magazine published by the media center of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan”. The Taliban distribute it across the Arab Gulf as well.

Abu Ahmed admits that the extreme illiteracy rates in the region do present a major problem, although he does not mention that the Taliban are largely credited for bans on education for women in Afghanistan. Ahmed claims, “Afghans who can read pass on the information in the magazines to all members of their families,” before adding that women are now involved in the magazines’ production and in their military struggle as well.

The propaganda wing of the Taliban calls itself the “Information and Cultural Department,” run by Abdul Hai Mutmain, once head of the Taliban’s “information department” in Kandahar. Abu Ahmed concludes with a personal warning, “The first thing we teach our children is ‘Allah’. The second is fighting the Americans.”

The Taliban have a sophisticated public relations machine which is creating more difficulties for anti-Taliban factions to win the ever-important propaganda war, reports the BBC.

However, some say civilian casualties from allied forces air strikes and violations of local customs such as house and personal searches has created an environment where Taliban propaganda can take root. “They talk about occupation, they highlight the fact that foreign troops are killing Afghans and raiding their homes - and it works,” says Afghan political commentator Rostar Tarakai.

While the Taliban try to discredit the local governments and their allies “by calling them ‘infidels’, ‘invaders’, ‘traitors’, ‘collaborators’, ‘corrupters’, ‘puppet

regime' and 'traitor government.'" The propaganda fight is intense because whoever wins it will gain the support of the people and stands a chance of winning the war on the ground too," concludes Tarakai.

## Loosing Faith in IslamOnline

The government of Qatar recently forced some Islamic leaders off the popular Islamic website IslamOnline, reports Hadeel Al-Shalchi at The Associated Press.

The Qatari website, which has its editorial offices in Egypt, is a well-known resource for Muslims. The website receives approximately 350,000 hits a day as visitors seek information on the arts, sciences, and health from an Islamic perspective. The site also has a fatwa section where people can receive religious decrees on a wide range of topics.

Allegedly, the Qatari management attempted to assume editorial control of the website. The company's Cairo-based employees claim they were barred from posting reports on the website, and on March 17 over 300 IslamOnline reporters camped out in their offices to protest the management in Qatar, according to Agence France Presse.

Fathi Abu Hatab, a company employee, stated that the management's more conservative approach prompted the strike. "Our Doha correspondent wasn't allowed to cover the Doha Film Festival because it was deemed un-Islamic. We were receiving complaints [from management] about our discussions on women's health, homosexuality, and films," Abu Hatab commented.

The IslamOnline management eventually cut off Egypt's access to the site while periodically updated the site's content with news articles, neglecting the other sections of the website. Eventually, the management offered the Cairo employees a choice: apply for positions at the Doha office or resign from IslamOnline.

Sheikh Youssef Al-Qaradawi, an Islamic cleric and the co-founder of IslamOnline, was let go from his position as the head of Al-Balagh, the

company which funds the website. Al-Qaradawi's removal from the company was indicative of a shift within the company from moderate to conservative.

According to The Associated Press, Al-Qaradawi is "one of the most influential voices in Sunni Islam." The Islamic cleric believes that men and women could be allowed study together, encourages Western Muslims to participate in their governments, and has condemned Al-Qaeda attacks. The Associated Press also reports that Al-Qaradawi has been criticized by conservative scholars for his personal opinions regarding some gender-related issues.

Diana Mukkaled at Asharq-Alawsat questions whether the controversy at IslamOnline represents a broader "internal Islamic controversy." The debate, she surmises, ultimately returns to the tension between conservative and moderate forms of Islam. Raising an important question, Mukkaled asks, "Who sets the standards for moderation or extremism here?"

In Mukkaled's opinion, while IslamOnline expresses conservative beliefs concerning certain issues, it also promotes some moderate ideas. However, according to Mukkaled, the lack of transparency in this specific situation is alarming. "The bottom line is that [IslamOnline] is suffering a setback, but the discussion surrounding this is unclear and is taking place behind closed doors," she writes.

The Inquirer quotes Terry Pattar, an associate with Jane's Strategic Advisory Services, who says extremist groups can take advantage of the internet by creating an insular environment. "Extremist groups have these close[d] environments and spaces they can create where the people who come to consume the material they are producing are already interested or sympathetic," Pattar said. "They can live in quite an enclosed little world where they can really perceive one viewpoint," he added.

Pattar also asserts that website creators can control the content of their sites, eliminating the opposing view. "The webmasters who control discussion forums in these kind of environments will be very quick to get rid of comments that dissent from the message they are trying to promote.

There is that danger," he cautioned.

According to Mukkaled, IslamOnline should promote transparency in all aspects of their operations. "Perhaps what we need is a measure of transparency in order to discover what kind of controversy has taken place at [IslamOnline]," she suggests. "This is something that we definitely need in order to state that [IslamOnline] is a moderate site."

## Domestic Distractions Detracting from Obama's Foreign Policy?

With the massive push for healthcare reform eating up much of the Obama administration's time, energy, and resources, President Obama's foreign policy and international outreach has been left by the wayside, asserts Thomas DeCaro at the blog The Foundry for The Heritage Foundation.

Citing Obama's second postponement his trip to Australia and Indonesia, DeCaro wonders how much longer the international community is willing to wait before they capture the president's attention once more.

Jennifer Rubin of Commentary Magazine stresses that while Obama claimed that strengthening ties and engaging both allies and unfriendly governments would be a top priority of his administration, the US president has yet to make any measurable headway in that arena.

"If this is Obama's idea of forging bonds with foreign leaders (condemning his country, reading the prime minister the riot act, twice snubbing Netanyahu during his White House visits), our foreign policy apparatus surely is guilty of gross malfeasance," Rubin writes. "Perhaps less time spent crafting sotires for the Post and more time working on a viable foreign policy... would be in order."

Despite a few eloquent speeches and press appearances, Obama's foreign

policy overtures have been of little substance, according to Rubin. She quotes Simon Serfaty of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, who remarks Obama “is beginning to face a crisis of efficacy.”

Gregg Carlstrom of The Majlis points to Obama’s recent six-hour trip to Afghanistan, which was his first visit to the country since taking office, brushing it off as a “quick hop.”

“The trip itself won’t accomplish much,” Carlstrom writes. “A six-hour visit to Kabul, half of it spent at Bagram Air Base, won’t cause Hamid Karzai to rethink his politics or policy.”

According to the Washington Post, Obama is also facing renewed attacks from one of the nation’s most virulent enemies—Osama bin Laden. The Al-Qaeda leader recently released a new tape threatening the American president over the proposed trials of detained terror suspects.

“He’s putting for an image of Obama in the Muslim world as kind of a Judge Roy Bean,” former CIA counter-terrorism analyst Michael Scheuer told the Washington Post. “You know, ‘We’re gonna try ‘em and hang ‘em.’”

However, Gregg Carlstrom emphasizes that President Obama is only one voice among many on the world stage. “The focus on good governance and corruption is valid—though how much influence, really, will the Obama administration have?”

## Advancing the Internet Industry in the MENA Region

In the last week of March, Arab technology experts and innovators gathered at the ArabNet 2010 Conference in Beirut, Lebanon, writes The National.

Over 600 attendees and 25,000 virtual attendees from the Middle East, Europe, and the United States conferred to discuss the future of the internet in the region. According to Zawya, the panels were led by forty speakers, and aimed at promoting a regional effort

for the development of social media and increasing Arabic web content.

*“We are capable of building projects worth millions of dollars in the Arab world.”*

*Samih Toukan, CEO of Jabbar Group & founder of Maktoob.com.*

The attendees commented on the vast size of the market in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, agreeing that companies must endeavor to reach the entire population of the region’s 300 million consumers in order to achieve successful outcomes.

Samih Toukan, CEO of the Jabbar Group and the founder of Maktoob.com, spoke of the importance of viewing the MENA region as one market. “Even though each Arabic country has a special and different system, foreign investors look at the Arab world as one market, because the Arabic market is a leader in the growth of consumers’ network, and we are capable of building projects worth millions of dollars in the Arab world.”

Jabbar also advised the conference attendees that “a healthy environment for entrepreneurs requires financial liquidity, more companies in addition to more flexibility from investors.”

One of the conference’s goals was to transform the fragmented and underdeveloped regional internet industry into a concentrated regional effort. “We can be global; we can do our own only success story like in the West or in Asia. We will do it differently, in our own way,” asserted Rani Saad, the managing director of the Middle East Venture Partners.

Another focus of the ArabNet 2010 conference was the prominent role of social media in the region. Iloubnan, info recounts the findings of a recent

Arab Media Outlook study, whereby 70 percent of the population in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates use social networking sites, with 15 percent of the users accessing these sites at least once a day.

“Social Media is the change. It is clearly the future,” claimed Patrick Atallah, the head the 90:10 Group in France and Italy.

Iloubnan reports that the panelists also discussed the importance of localizing online communities, and was “asked to explore how social media has changed the way individuals and corporations connect, share, and discover content.”

The conferences also included a discussion of Arabic-language content on the internet. Maher Kaddoura, managing director of the Huron Consulting Group, maintained that the internet industry needed to address “the Arab masses,” referencing the 250 million regional customers who solely speak the Arabic language. Despite the large size of the Arabic market, about one percent of internet content is in Arabic.

Andy Abbar, Senior Director of Product and Product Marketing Management for Yahoo! Middle East, asserted, “1% is not acceptable.” He advised that the content should be accessible to all users in the region, noting that Yahoo’s acquisition of Maktoob is a step in the right direction. “We are also working on building local services that are relevant to the region,” he reported.

“We need to have more structured content in Arabic,” agreed Wael Ghonim, the head of Marketing MENA at Google, adding that the Arabic content should be better optimized on search engines.

On the other hand, The National details one of the latest developments in Arabic-language websites. The Egyptian company Sarmady has partnered with the American National Basketball Association (NBA) to develop an Arabic-language website about the basketball association.

In the aftermath of the ArabNet conference, another country received permission to have an Arabic domain name. Hannan Taha at the Global Arab Network reports that the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) approved Qatar

to have its internet domain names (IDN) written in the Arabic alphabet. Qatar is among the first countries in the world that will use non-Latin language scripts in domain names.

Other Arab countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates have already received permission from ICANN, while Palestine and Tunisia have recently received fast-track approval for their Arabic country domain names.

“The ability to have Arabic language internet domains is a vital step in making the internet more accessible to the people living in Qatar and across the Arab region. Until now, non-English speakers have faced significant barriers when trying to access the internet. This is one of the most important recent changes to the internet and I expect it will help spur the creation of more local websites and digital content,” said Dr. Hessa Al-Jaber, ICTQATAR’s Secretary General.

## Israeli Settlements Raises Concerns

The relationship between the US and Israel has hit a sour note following Vice President Biden’s recent visit and Netanyahu’s announcement of expanding an existing East Jerusalem settlement, asserts DeWayne Wickham for USA Today. The Obama administration has expressed concern over the news of building 1,600 new housing units in the Ramat Shlomo settlement, urging the prime minister to rescind his decision.

Besides hindering the peace-process between Israel and Palestine and “inflaming the region,” Bruce Clarke from the Examiner argues that the administration fears the Israeli government’s current course of action may have also strained their longstanding friendship.

General David Petraeus, the commander of US Central Command, previously highlighted the impact of such a move on US interests in the region. According to USA Today, Petraeus declared that “Arab anger over the Palestinian question” hurts the United States’ relationship with other governments in the region and “weakens the legitimacy” of moderate Arab leaders.

Similarly, Secretary Clinton condemned the new construction as “a deeply negative signal” of Israel’s relationship with the United States, indicating that the Israeli government “needed to demonstrate [its commitment] not just through words but through specific actions.”

Despite these concerns, Netanyahu maintained his original position in a speech to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), stating that “Jerusalem is not a settlement; it’s our capital.”

AIPAC, one of the biggest pro-Israel lobbying organizations, criticized the administration’s reaction, writes Sasha Polakow-Suransky, the senior editor at Foreign Affairs. In a press release, AIPAC urged President Obama to “take immediate steps to defuse the tension with the Jewish State” and “make a conscious effort to move away from public demands and unilateral deadlines directed at Israel.”

Polakow-Suransky warns that the Jewish state could face long-term strategic liabilities and security threats due to the settlement expansion, regarding the enterprise as a public diplomacy disaster for Israel.

In the meantime, recent initiatives are underway in the region aiming to improve the relationship between Israel and its Arab neighbors to foster mutual peace and understanding.

In March, a group of Palestinian reporters from Gaza and the West Bank met their Israeli counterparts on a tour of Tel Aviv as part of an initiative to build bridges between the two groups, reports Ben Hartman for The Jerusalem Post. The tour, organized by an Israeli non-profit advocacy group called “The Israel Project,” focused on “educating the press and the public about Israel while promoting security, freedom and peace.”

The reporters also met the head of the Arabic-language branch of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Spokesman’s Office, Major Avichai Edri, and discussed a number of issues including politics, differences in perceptions, Hamas, and censorship. Edri described the meeting as very successful and informative, even though there were some issues where they “agreed to disagree.”

“It was exactly what we wanted. We didn’t want them to come for some hard-core hasbara [public diplomacy] meeting, with briefings from Israeli officials,” said Shimrit Meir, the senior advisor for the Israel Project’s Arab Media Program. “Everything we can do to give them a balanced atmosphere and a different view of Israel as well as interactions with Israelis is very positive. This human interaction is the best hasbara possible,” she continued.

*“Jerusalem is not a settlement; it’s our capital.”*

*Benjamin Netanyahu, Prime Minister of Israel.*

A documentary hosted at the Museum of Tolerance entitled, “Among the Righteous: Lost Stories from the Holocaust in Arab Lands,” represents another effort to promote respect between Jews and Muslims.

The Los Angeles Times reports that the documentary, which was funded by both Jewish and Muslim donors, was based on a book by Dr. Robert Satloff, a historian and executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. It shed the light on Arab efforts in saving Jews from the Holocaust, in an attempt to help change Arab views of the Holocaust and consequently improve Arab/Jewish relations.

Gathering information and firsthand testimony from Jewish survivors and descendants of Arab rescuers who saved Jews from deportation, Satloff hoped that his documentary would lead to further research in the subject, honoring all the Arabs involved and cultivating better understanding.

# Terrorists Without a Cause

Ali Ibrahim, managing editor of Asharq-Alawsat, denounces the suicide bombing attacks on Moscow's subway systems that occurred earlier this month. The violence of these attacks has come to be commonly associated with Islam, tarnishing Muslims worldwide, despite the disapproval of Muslims towards such actions.

As he denounces the breadth of destruction of these attacks he points out that the "deviant terrorist ideology" exploits the injustices and grievances of many worldwide.

Ibrahim remarks that these attacks are usually executed by impressionable, angry individuals who are "brainwashed" into carrying them out on someone else's behalf.

Ibrahim further describes the obvious immorality behind such attacks, as highlights the lack of their political effectiveness in achieving any political or social agenda. The exploitation of what might be a legitimate cause to justify random killings robs a people of any legitimacy in having their grievances addressed. Atrocities against civilians are not only immoral, but they engender opposite reactions from those intended by the terrorists, argues Ibrahim.

"While it is true that acts of terrorism result in media attention, this attention is always negative and international public opinion firmly opposes terrorism and killing," he comments before concluding, "in reality, terrorism only deserves international condemnation and denunciation, as was the case following the Moscow terrorist attack."

In other news, Al-Arabiya was cited by the Global Times in reporting on a foiled to blast major petroleum facilities in Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia arrested 113 individuals believed to have links to Al-Qaeda in Yemen. A 101-strong terrorist network cell as well two six-member cells were dismantled by the Saudi forces, the Dubai-based channel said.

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