



Al-Hurra Discussion Continues

In the aftermath of a Congressional hearing on *Al-Hurra's* editorial policies following the US network's broadcast of a speech by Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and extensive coverage of a Tehran conference in which the Holocaust was denied, Kim Andrew Elliott argues in a *New York Times* editorial that "whatever the outcome of this investigation, it should not lead to a change in America's basic approach to international broadcasting." Elliott asserts, "Full-time advocacy of American policies would not attract many listeners or viewers." He points out that the target audience would seek alternative, less-biased programs, such as the *BBC's* Arabic channel that is slated to begin broadcasting within the year. Elliott calls on the government to financially support US Broadcasting entities "while at the same time giving them the independence necessary to provide a credible news product." Furthermore, balanced news, he argues, is tantamount to "democracy in action," which American policy envisions for the region.

In contrast, Joel Mowbray argues in the *Wall Street Journal* for increased monitoring of Al-Hurra because of coverage that appears biased against US policy. Mowbray identifies former Al-Hurra executive Yasser Thabet as the "leading figure" responsible for "shaping news coverage in the region." Mowbray portrays Thabet as sympathetic to Hezbollah and Saddam Hussein, close with the late Yasser Arafat and Bashar Assad, and biased against Israel in coverage of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Mowbray attributes the mistake of Thabet's tenure at Al-Hurra

to Al-Hurra's News Director Larry Register, formerly Vice President of Special Projects for CNN. According to Mowbray, "Nine of the 13 members of the Appropriations on Foreign Operations House Subcommittee have already demanded that Mr. Register's employment be terminated."

As a result of the controversy, Al-Hurra's oversight board, the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), will seek an outside review of the channel's content and reporting, reports the *New York Times*. The review will evaluate Al-Hurra's broadcasts for "journalistic integrity and adherence to the standards and principles" of American-funded programming.

In additional news, according to a follow-up blog by Joel Mowbray on *PowerlineBlog.com*, the House Appropriations Committee rejected the BBG's request for \$11.1 million in funding for new programming at Al-Hurra for fiscal year 2007, despite strong support for the financial request from Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes. Instead, the 2008 spending bill will provide \$4.28 million for the transparency program that Rep. Steve Rothman (NJ-9) proposed in March, which calls for 24-hour live streaming, archiving and translation of Al-Hurra's programming. Mowbray argues the funding could be approved if Register is fired. The subcommittee on Foreign Operations Appropriations mandated "substantive actions to fix Al-Hurra and restore public confidence through dramatically increased transparency." The subcommittee also requested an investigation-independent of that to be implemented by the BBG—to be carried out by the State Department Inspector General's office. Furthermore, Al-Hurra will be required to make

available in the United States a live stream of its broadcasts, maintain online digital archives for 60 days, and provide English transcripts for 20 hours of randomly-selected broadcasts each week. (See Also: LR III.11 'Al-Hurra Hearing', LR III.10 'Al-Hurra Quandary: Mowbray, Blaya, Rothman')

As-Sahab: The Rise of New Media through Al-Qaeda's Eyes

Insurgent videos documenting attacks on Coalition forces in Afghanistan and Iraq have been growing in frequency and scope on the internet, while Al-Qaeda's media wing, *As-Sahab*, has been influential on both of America's current

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battlefronts in both Iraq and Afghanistan, according to a series of recent articles.

Since this past December, US officials have been working to shut down a Sunni insurgent satellite television station that broadcasts non-stop footage of attacks on US forces in Iraq. The station, also known as “Muj TV”, features shows such as *Hidden Camera Jihad*, a spoof on western-style hidden camera shows that features Iraqi insurgents killing US soldiers over a laugh track, mocking English captions, and Baathist-era patriotic songs, as reported by the *BBC*.

Shots of Anthony Quinn dressed in Arab robes also make frequent cameos between the station’s shows. His image was stolen from Moustapha Akkad’s film *Lion of the Desert*, in which Quinn played the national Libyan folk hero, Omar Moukhtar, a Sunni Muslim who fought against the invading Italian army, according to Lawrence Pintak.

On another of its programs aired this past December, an English-speaking narrator addresses President Bush and refers to the American soldiers killed in the field of battle as “miserable nobodies.” The show continues with scenes of car bombs being made, footage of US soldiers raiding Iraqi homes, torture pictures from Abu Ghraib, insurgents shooting RPGs at US soldiers, outtakes of President Bush conducting his “Mission Accomplished” speech, archival footage of Americans forced to evacuate Vietnam, and stolen clips from *Top Gun* and Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

While US forces were successful in closing down Al-Zawraa’s offices in Iraq late last year, Al-Zawraa moved its broadcasts to the Egyptian government-controlled satellite network NileSat. The Egyptian provider ceased transmission in mid-February when an “unknown signal” began to jam the broadcasts, according to *Lawrence Pintak*, head of the Adham Center for Electronic Journalism at the American University in Cairo. After leaving Egypt, the insurgent show began broadcasts through Paris-based Eutelsat Communications until Western pressure forced the European providers to pull the plug. Since then, Al-Zawraa has been using Dubai-based Arabsat to broadcast,

where the transmissions continue, much to the chagrin of US authorities.

Al-Zawraa is owned and operated by Mish’an al-Jaburi, a self-exiled member of Iraq’s Parliament who was accused of embezzling millions from the national coffers and currently lives in Syria. His insurgent channel broadcasts its shows using mobile TV equipment from a secret location around Damascus that is beamed to a satellite owned by Dubai-based Arabsat, according to Paul Richter of the *Los Angeles Times*.

Al-Zawraa is the media wing for the Islamic Army in Iraq, the largest organized Sunni insurgency group and led by former Iraqi Baathists and ex-Army officers.

Recently, the Islamic Army has taken arms not only against Coalition forces but also Al-Qaeda, both on the battlefield and in cyberspace. The rift between the two Sunni groups occurred earlier this year, following accusations from the Islamic Army that Al-Qaeda had harmed some of its Iraqi insurgents, failed to protect Iraqi civilians, and endangered the country of Iraq to further attacks from foreign invaders, according to the *LA Times*.

Mr. al-Jaburi, the head of Al-Zawraa, went on the air this past February to bitterly criticize Al-Qaeda’s killing of a group of Iraqi Sunni tribal elders who refused to cooperate with them, according to *Lawrence Pintak*.

In the mixed Baghdad neighborhood of Amiriya, a recent 48-hour firefight between elements of Al-Qaeda and the Islamic Army filled the streets, leaving many dead, according to a report by Mussab Al-Khairalla for *Reuters*. Iraqi analyst Hazim al-Nuami told Al-Khairalla that “this battle was expected because Al-Qaeda has angered Iraqis by disregarding their well-being during their fight.”

While the smoke has finally settled in Amiriya, the crossfire between the two former allies has continued in cyberspace.

On the Islamic Army’s website, spokesman Ali al-Nuami released an audio statement accusing Al-Qaeda of killing forty Islamic Army insurgents and turning Iraqi Sunni cities into “ghost towns”. Spokesman Al-Nuami says, “We hold Abu Hamza al-Masri and Abu Omar al-Baghdadi [Al-Qaeda’s key leaders in

Iraq] responsible for what their followers have done to Sunnis. They should fear their outcome between God’s hands on the day of resurrection.”

Al-Qaeda’s Islamic State website responded by calling the Islamic Army “backstabbers” and says that “this has to be settled, either by leaving the backstabber or by confronting him and making him abide by God’s laws.”

According to Reuters, Al-Qaeda sympathizers have also started posting incendiary counter responses on various websites, some of them alleging that the Amiriya battle began when the Islamic Army blew up a man in the process of erasing anti-Al-Qaeda graffiti. Another Al-Qaeda post referred to Islamic Army members as “dogs”, which is considered a grave insult in Arabic.

According to the *LA Times*, this recent jihadi internet flame war has been greeted warmly in Riyadh, who share Al-Zawraa’s new-found ambition of driving Iraqi Sunnis away from Al-Qaeda’s influence. The Saudis, who are the principal shareholders of Arabsat, have shown little incentive in forcing the satellite operator from ceasing Al-Zawraa’s transmission. Arabsat is owned by the 22 countries of the Arab League.

One unnamed US official qualified the Saudi inaction to the *LA Times*, “You have to be opposed to the occupation if you are to be a player. To us, this looks like an outrage. To them, looking at it from the regional perspective, it’s something they need to do...this is a deep game they’re playing. But you could say there’s a method to their madness.”

The US official went on to say that the Saudi government has been effective in discouraging Iraqi Sunnis from joining Al-Qaeda’s ranks and were also a powerful counter to Iranian influence in the Realpolitik of Mideastern “personalities, money and Byzantine backroom deals.”

“They’re skilled at it; we’re clumsy,” he told the *LA Times*.

“As so often in US Mideast policy,” he continued, “there’s an inherent contradiction.”

Another inherent contradiction, according to *Lawrence Pintak*, is that “the US, which is demanding freedom and

democracy in the Arab world, wants a TV station muzzled.”

For the time being, Saudi officials are concentrating on clamping down on Al-Qaeda’s media apparatus inside their own borders. On Tuesday, Saudi intelligence arrested three Al-Qaeda suspects running terrorist websites, according to an article in *Media Line*.

More than forty gigabytes of video and print material were seized from one suspect, Abu Asid Al-Falouji, which includes footage of prior Al-Qaeda attacks in the Kingdom. A second suspect, Abu ‘Abdallah A-Najdi, was reportedly establishing a new Al-Qaeda-affiliated website with a homepage that delivered a speech from Osama Bin Laden and data that contained plans to destroy oil facilities, undermine the Saudi government and drive out foreign investment.

According to the *Media Line* article, Al-Qaeda also uses these websites to recruit Saudi teenagers and to liaise with other Jihadi groups operating inside the Kingdom. The ideology from these online sites espouse the concept of *takfir* – labeling non-believers as heretics. To date, Al-Qaeda’s attacks within the Saudi Kingdom have led to the deaths of close to 300 people, including foreigners, and have targeted key economic interests.

Meanwhile in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Taliban have formed an alliance-of-necessity with Al-Qaeda, with whose world view they do not fully espouse. The Taliban’s now-deceased former military commander, Mullah Dadullah, once said that the Taliban’s planning and operations were one and the same with those of Al-Qaeda, according to Philip Smucker of the *Washington Times*.

In an interview with Mr. Smucker, the former Taliban ambassador to Pakistan Mullah Abdul Salam Zaeef explains why, “If I am the Taliban, I must try to find something to help me fight America to defend myself – if this [is] possible from Al-Qaeda, or if it is possible from Pakistan or from Iraq – because with empty hands it is not possible to fight.”

According to the *Washington Times*, there has been a noticeable shift in media

tactics from the Taliban that bears an uncanny resemblance to Al-Qaeda’s worldwide methods, particularly those implemented in Iraq.

“They are doing what works in Iraq and often succeeding,” said Lutfullah Mashal, director of strategic communications in Afghanistan’s National Security Council.

Taliban websites now feature videos with masked militants training in Al-Qaeda camps and grisly beheadings, which mirrors the look and focus of Al-Qaeda’s media wing, As-Sahab.

Far removed from the days of banning television, the modern Taliban now use embedded cameramen when carrying out ambushes on allied forces. Their newly released videos also demonstrate that Al-Qaeda’s Arab media trainers have resumed their roles as trusted advisors to the Taliban’s mainly ethnic Pashtun movement, according to the *Washington Times*.

As-Sahab, which is based in Pakistan, has recently increased levels of dissemination and production quality, according to Jim Krane of the *Associated Press*. The group’s videos have been increasing in frequency, having so far released 48 videos this year, nearly doubling last year’s total. In 2005, the group only released 16 videos.

Their newest productions have slick animation, promotional title screens, English dubbing and subtitles that are offered online in many formats, including both widescreen versions and video accessibility through mobile phones.

“We’re expecting their next step to be high-definition TV,” Intelcenter’s chief executive Ben Venzke told the *Associated Press*.

“The exposure these [videos] get now is very significant and moves quickly,” Mr. Venzke says.

“Just look at the media coverage alone, not just in the States but all over the world. Younger people share these videos just like you and I share text e-mails. Some of these are getting huge exposure.”

As-Sahab’s audience has been growing as a result, according to the *Associated Press*, principally via

distribution through user-generated blogs and video-sharing sites like YouTube.

According to Reuters, the increased number of releases is a deliberate strategy from the top ranks of Al-Qaeda. In one of his recently released videos, Ayman al-Zawahiri, Bin Laden’s deputy, has stressed the importance of As-Sahab’s video wing.

At the forefront of the terrorist media wing are its two fugitive anchors: Libyan Abu Laith al-Libi and the American Adam Yehiyeh Gadahn. Anchor al-Libi recently urged Islamic insurgents in Somalia to produce videos to garner more international attention for their fight and anchor Adam Gadahn’s most recent clip, *Message from the Mujahedin Brother*, he addresses President Bush and says, “You’re losing on all fronts, and losing big time.”

Jeremy Binnie, a terrorism analyst with the Jane’s military affairs consultancy in London, told Reuters that European terror plots revealed suspects were watching these online videos and that they “played a significant part in radicalizing these guys as teenagers.”

Reuters contends that the biggest concern for Western security analysts is that these videos will be a terrorist attractor to a new audience with Western passports that are familiar to the country they plan to attack and remain unknown to local authorities.

In his interview with Reuters, Jeremy Binnie contends that it’s this young audience that Al-Qaeda is seeking to influence. According to Mr. Binnie, “It’s easier to conduct operations in the UK or the US if you’ve already got a passport and know the culture.”

Floyd Critiques US Foreign Policy; New PD Initiatives

A *Forth Worth Star-Telegram* op-ed by former US State Department Director of Media Relations Price Floyd on May 25 has made waves in US foreign policy circles, reports *Slate.com*. The online

magazine characterized Floyd's piece "as damning a commentary on President George W. Bush's foreign policies as any of the critiques from retired military officers."

Despite the government's hiring of public relations experts including advertising executive Charlotte Beers, James Baker's press aide Margaret Tutwiler, and President George W. Bush's former public relations adviser Karen Hughes to succeed each other as Undersecretaries of State for Public Diplomacy, Floyd writes that public relations techniques cannot override policy decisions. "An unprecedented effort to reach audiences both in the US and overseas to explain our foreign policy objectives" including 6,500 interviews—half of which were conducted with international media—in the past six years has not succeeded in transforming sinking

"We need to bring more officials from foreign governments and nongovernmental organizations the US - not just to Washington but to Middle America, small-town America, even the inner cities of America."

*US State Department
Director of Media Relations
Price Floyd in a Forth Worth
Star-Telegram editorial*

global opinion of America, argues Floyd. In order to counter anti-Americanism, Floyd recommends increasing public diplomacy and "the number of people-to-people exchanges. We need to bring more officials from foreign governments and nongovernmental organizations to the US—not just to Washington but to Middle America, small-town America, even the inner cities of America." He cites neglect of the Kyoto Accords, the International Criminal Court, and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, as well as the scandals at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay, as incidents that have "sullied the image of America." Floyd worked at the State Department for over 17 years, and is now the Director of External Relations for the Center for a New American Security.

Floyd's resignation comes at a time when the US ranked 96 out of 121 countries on the Global Peace Index. The index is calculated on the basis of 24 different factors "including levels of violence, organized crime, and military expenditure," reports *The Daily Star*. According to *Voice of America News*, the report attributes the sub-par ranking to involvement in international conflicts and elevated domestic crime rates. Norway received the top ranking, and Iraq the lowest. The Daily Star announces the rankings of Middle Eastern countries as follows: 22. Oman; 30. Qatar; 38. United Arab Emirates; 39. Tunisia; 46. Kuwait; 48. Morocco; 58. Libya; 62. Bahrain; 63. Jordan; 73. Egypt; 77. Syria; 90. Saudi Arabia; 92. Turkey; 95. Yemen; 97. Iran; 107. Algeria; 114. Lebanon; 119. Israel; 120. Sudan; 121. Iraq. According to the Daily Star, the study is "backed by international figures including the Dalai Lama, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, former US President Jimmy Carter, and US economist Joseph Stiglitz, all Nobel laureates. It is also supported by Queen Nour of Jordan."

In a more cinematic effort of public diplomacy, California Representative Diane Watson (D-33) plans to address national security concerns and American image overseas by distributing classic Hollywood movies abroad. According to the *Los Angeles Times*, Watson proposes that movies including *Meet Me in St.*

Louis, National Velvet, and Lassie Come Home be available in US embassies and consulates worldwide for public access and consumption. Watson's idea depends on donations of films "highlighting American culture, society, values, and history." The proposal dovetails with Floyd's emphasis on the importance of the cultural promotion formerly carried out by the US Information Agency (USIA). Before then-Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Jesse Helms dismantled USIA and relegated it to the State Department, USIA "had been a fairly independent agency mandated with blaring the principles of American culture and democracy across the world."

Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes will implement a new strategy for public diplomacy and strategic communication, the US State Department announced in a June 6 press release. The plan is "designed to provide a unified strategic framework for US government communications" drawn from a variety of public diplomacy recommendations and reports from a wide range of "very diverse government agencies."

Arab Journalists in the Line of Fire

According to *Press TV Online*, Reporters Without Borders has "called for the establishment of a special police unit to investigate media killings in Iraq" after a record number of 12 journalists were killed in May.

The so-called "Middle East Quartet," composed of the US, Russia, the UN, and the EU, has issued condemnation of the kidnapping of BBC journalist Alan Johnston, *BBC* reports. Johnston was kidnapped three months ago in Gaza City, where he was the sole Western reporter to have a permanent assignment. (See Also LR III.12 'Johnston Video Surfaces')

A recent journalist fatality in Iraq involves Nazar Abd Al-Wahid Al-Radhi, a 37-year-old father of three, who died while covering a press event in the

southern Iraqi city of Al-Amarah. *Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty* reports that Mr. Al-Rahdi, one of its correspondents reporting for *Radio Free Iraq*, was shot on May 30.

According to the network's reports, Al-Radhi "risked his life to tell the world what was happening in his hometown in Iraq's Maysan Governorate." RFE/RL President Jeff Gedmin condemned Al-Radhi's murder, noting, "He was a dedicated and courageous correspondent. The best tribute we can pay him is to continue his work."

Al-Radhi was the second Radio Free Iraq correspondent killed in two months, in what the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) reports has been an especially deadly year for media workers in the country. A new report by the IFJ, entitled *Breaking the Chains*, declares that more journalists have been killed in Iraq than any other conflict in recent history.

The IFJ, which represents over half a million journalists in over 100 countries, presented this report as part of its May 30 World Congress in Moscow. The report also highlights concerns about kidnapping, imprisonment, and legal restrictions set on the media, and calls for an end to the targeting of journalists.

Strained relationships between the media and the government in Algeria and Lebanon have made news recently. In Algeria, *Le Figaro* reiterated its support for one of its correspondents, Arezki Ait Larbi, who was arrested April 26 in Algiers for an unresolved 1994 slander case. The paper condemns the subsequent "harassment by the Algerian authorities." Larbi was sentenced in absentia to six months in prison for providing an Algerian newspaper with "accounts he had gathered from prisoners at Tazoult Penitentiary."

In a separate case, *Aujourd'hui le Maroc* reports that Reporters Without Borders is "indignant" over the May 27 detention of two Algerian *Al-Watan* journalists on the grounds of "defamation." The reporters were sentenced to two months in prison and fined one million dinars, or \$14,348. Al-Watan director of publication Omar

Belhouchet and Chawki Amari has decided to appeal the verdict.

Dubai-based *Al-Arabiya* news channel alleges that one of its Palestinian cameramen was assaulted by Lebanese soldiers while he was recording a battle between the army and militants at the Nahr al-Bared Palestinian refugee camp in Tripoli, Lebanon, *Reuters* reports. The soldiers apparently asked reporters from the channel to cease filming and camera man Khaled Mousa was detained briefly for continuing to capture footage.

Agence France-Presse reports that two Al-Arabiya affiliates, Palestinian reporter Wael Issam and Lebanese cameraman Mahmud Mahfuzwere, were detained by the Lebanese army for several hours because they had "infiltrated without permission to the frontline, putting themselves and the army in danger with live coverage," states a security source. The camp has been off-limits to journalists during the ongoing battle between the Lebanese army and Islamist extremists that broke out on May 21.

Al-Arabiya reporter Rami Maktabi said of the incident, "We are journalists doing our jobs. Khaled Mousa is just a journalist, nothing else. He was trying to film from a close distance and he was not trying to film army locations."

Female Palestinian Reporters Threatened

Female Palestinian television reporters received threats of decapitation from the "extremist fringe group Swords of Truth" if they do not adhere to traditional religious styles of dress, reports the *Daily Telegraph*. The group submitted a statement to Gaza media outlets on June 1 promising to "cut throats, from vein to vein, if needed to protect the spirit and morals of this nation."

According to the *Associated Press (AP)*, "most of the 15 women broadcasters on government-run Palestine TV wear headscarves. But they also wear

makeup and Western clothing, which is not considered strictly observant by the extremists." AP reports that several female Palestinian journalists received personal threats and harassment on their cell phones prior to the release of the statement.

Palestinian journalists and filmmakers demonstrated in protest on June 3 and 4 in Gaza, but others told the AP that they would avoid work for the next few days.

The hard-line group has also "claimed responsibility for bombing Internet cafés and music shops," though the group is newly formed and is believed to have less than one hundred members.

Also in the Palestinian territories, on June 5, masked men broke into the headquarters of Palmedia, a Palestinian press agency in Gaza, reports the *International Middle East Media Center*. The militants fired shots before confiscating a computer and television editing equipment.

Johnston Video Surfaces

A video of kidnapped *BBC* reporter Alan Johnston was posted on the internet last week, reports *Adnkronos International*. This is the second video purported kidnappers from the group *Jaish Al-Islam* (the Army of Islam) have released in regards to Johnston and is the first footage of the reporter that has

"Everyday there are Palestinians arrested, imprisoned for no reason."

Kidnapped Reporter Alan Johnston in a video from alleged kidnappers Jaish Al-Islam

surfaced since his March 12 abduction in Gaza.

The video features Johnston calling for the repeal of the Western economic embargo on the Palestinian territories, which was put in place following the election of the Hamas government. He deplores the suffering of Palestinians, stating, “Everyday there are Palestinians arrested, imprisoned for no reason. People are killed on a daily basis. The economic suffering is terrible, especially here in Gaza.” Additionally, Johnston speaks of the “failed invasion of Iraq by America and Britain,” and argues that the United Kingdom is occupying Muslim lands in Iraq against the wishes of the people, reports *CNN*. Though the video shows a healthy Johnston, it is uncertain when the video was filmed and what Johnston’s condition is at present.

The Army of Islam’s first video, sent to *Al-Jazeera* on May 8, exhibits Johnston’s identity card and includes an audio list of demands. Among the demands, the video calls for the release of Abu Qatada, a Palestinian-born Islamic cleric, currently jailed in Britain.

Last month, the group *Kataeb Al-Jihad Al-Tawheed* (the Brigades of Holy War and Unity) claimed that it had executed Johnston though Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas insisted that the reporter was alive.

At the time of his kidnapping, Johnston was the only Western journalist reporting from Gaza.

(See also LR III.10 ‘Johnston Tape; Guantanamo Detainees’, LR III.9 ‘Kidnapped Reporter Johnston ‘Alive’)

Arabs Love Cellphones But Lackluster About Cyberspace

According to a recent report by the Arab Advisors Group, internet usage in the Arab world remains low. The report called the *Total Country Connectivity Measure (TCCM)* states, “Arab broadband internet markets remain far less developed than Organization for

Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) markets,” reports *AME Info*. For example Bahrain led the Arab world in 2006 with an internet broadband penetration of 5.79% while Denmark, South Korea and the United States had 32%, 29% and 20% penetration respectively.

“The Arab world still lags behind developed countries in the penetration and use of broadband internet—and internet access at large,” states Arab Advisors Group founder

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*Jawad Jalal Abbassi
Arab Advisor Group Founder*

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Though internet usage is low, connectivity growth in the region is substantial, mostly driven by increased cellular telephone service. Abbassi warns that replicating the telecommunications growth in the internet market will be difficult: “While unleashing the cellular boom was relatively easy, affecting a similar boom in the Arab internet markets—a prerequisite for any knowledge-based economy—will require coordinated and intensive policies and initiatives.”

The report found the UAE to be the

most connected country in the Arab world followed by Qatar.

The TCCM is calculated by adding the household main phone lines penetration, cellular penetration, and internet users’ penetration rates in each of the 21 countries surveyed.

Though internet usage in the Arab world is low in comparison to global usage, Patty Keegan, General Manager of the Australian Interactive Advertising Bureau and director of Vanishing Point Media, argues that the value of internet advertising in the Middle East is expected to double from its current \$21 million to \$43 million in 2011, according to *7 Days*.

The number of internet users across the Middle East is projected to rise to 60 million by 2008, from 25 million currently, reports *7 Days*. “There’s plenty of potential for growth across all the market sectors in online advertising. It may be a virtual marketplace but online is delivering real results. It’s proven its worth and marketers are recognizing its value,” states Keegan.

Despite internet growth, Amnesty International has issued a warning to curb the “virus of internet repression,” reports *BBC*. The international rights group argues that the internet “could change beyond all recognition” unless action is taken to protect internet users’ rights. The group names China and Egypt as two repressors of internet freedom. Amnesty International also accuses companies such as Google, Microsoft and Yahoo of complicity in the censorship.

According to *Al-Arabiya*, censorship is prevalent in cellular communication as well. Yemeni authorities blocked SMS distribution from non-governmental news agencies after a series of text messages and Bluetooth videos featuring Yemeni President Ali Abdullah Saleh’s unfulfilled campaign promises.

Axis of Laughter

Two comedy troupes featuring Arab Americans have made strides in

“What we’re doing is taking the things that people accept, that drive their stereotypes, and we’re ripping them apart.”

Palestinian-American Writer Ray Hanania on the Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour

promoting understanding in the Middle East and the Western world. A troupe composed of one Palestinian-American and three Jewish comedians hope to breach the “divide in one of the world’s enduring conflicts,” the Arab-Israeli conflict, reports Bruce DeMara of *TheStar.com*. After touring Israel for five months, the group will perform in Canada at Toronto’s Roy Thomson Hall.

Palestinian-American Ray Hanania, a Christian, with whom the idea of the Israeli-Palestinian Comedy Tour originated, explains “We don’t have to compromise our views to perform together...I’m not trying to convince Israelis that Palestinians are right and they’re wrong...and the Israeli comedians aren’t trying to convince audiences that the Israelis are right and Palestinians are wrong. What we’re doing is taking the things that people accept, that drive their stereotypes, and we’re ripping them apart.”

Hanania recruited Aaron Freeman, a black Jewish convert, Charley Warady, a Jewish-American who immigrated to Israel, and Yisrael Campbell, an Orthodox Jewish convert who also moved to Israel. The group’s efforts have received positive reviews, though Palestinian leader Ismail Haniya remains a critic, reports *TheStar.com*. Howard Szigeti, the coordinator of the lecture series that brought the group

to Toronto, says of the concept, “There were no incidents, no protests, nothing. Everybody basically rallied to the theme of the initiative: if we can laugh together, we can live together.”

In similar news, the “Axis of Evil” comedians, will play a part in a new television show. According to *Arabisto.com*, Comedy Central has approved the development of Palestinian-American comedian Dean Obeidallah’s pilot for a weekly series called “The Watch List.” Obeidallah will develop the show with Max Brooks, son of Mel Brooks and Emmy-winning writer for *Saturday Night Live*, as well as other Middle Eastern-American comics from Obeidallah’s “Axis of Evil” comedy group.

Obeidallah states, “If the show gets picked up it will mark the first TV series in American TV history to star all Middle Eastern-American comedians,” though he acknowledges that a show is rarely secured from a pilot episode. The other members of the troupe include Egyptian-American Ahmed Ahmed, Iranian-American Maz Jobrani, Palestinian-American Aron Kader and Palestinian-American Maysoun Ziyad, *Arabisto.com* reports. The “Axis of Evil” comedians are currently on a nationwide tour. (See also: LR II. 12 ‘US Muslims Counter Fear with Humor’)

Arab Media Faces Arab Policy

Iran lifted its three-week old moratorium on *Al-Jazeera* broadcasts from Parliament on May 28, reports Karim for Friends of *Al-Jazeera*. *Al-Jazeera* ceased broadcasting on May 6 following the strong reaction and public outcry of comments made on the talk show *Without Borders*, in which the leadership of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Iraq was questioned.

Since May 6, *Al-Jazeera* journalists were also barred from attending a press conference in the UAE featuring President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Mohsen Moqaddaszadeh, head of Iran’s Foreign Media, was quoted as saying that he hoped *Al-Jazeera* would “strengthen unity among Muslims and avoid creating

a rift among Muslims.” Viewers in Iran and Iraq protested widely following the airing of the show.

Reuters reports that the US military has cleared soldiers involved in the shooting death of two *Al-Arabiya* journalists that transpired during a firefight on March 18, 2004 in Iraq. A report published regarding the incident suggested that the two journalists had been caught in crossfire and were accidentally killed. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) is contesting the ruling stating that the published report did not include testimony from surviving *Al-Arabiya* employees, who said that US military personnel fired directly on the journalists’ vehicle. CPJ’s executive director Joel Simon stated that “the report’s failure to fully reconcile the varying witness accounts is troubling and leaves open the possibility that potentially damaging information was ignored or not fully considered.”

Meanwhile in Yemen, a June 3 joint article by Adnan al-Qaisy and Nora al-Absi of the *Yemen Observer* revealed that an FM radio frequency in the Yemeni capital of Sana’a has been hijacked by an illegal short-wave radio broadcast. A pirate radio broadcast is overriding 88.3 FM to deliver a Christian missionary message in Arabic. The Ministry of Information has identified the source as a wireless signal coming from a residential area of the city. The signal is weak and extends to only one district of the city.

The message has been playing sporadically for the last two weeks without the legal permission from authorities, including the Ministry of Information. Although the government has identified the location and source, as of June 3 no action has been taken to stop the illegal broadcast. There appears to be some contention as to whose responsibility it is to enforce the censure. The Secretary General of the Sana’a local council said it did not act as a disciplinary body and therefore the matter is out of their jurisdiction, and it is instead the responsibility of the Ministry of Information or Interior. Colonel Ahmed al-Sinaydar of the Ministry of the Interior said that it would not act without direction from the police or the public prosecution, while the Ministry of Information said that it had fulfilled its role in the matter by identifying and locating the source of the message.

US Opens Gates for Iraqis; Students Fly East for MBA

The Bush administration has implemented a series of guidelines to increase the number of Iraqi refugees admitted to the US who are “seeking asylum because helping Americans has put them at a huge risk,” reports *The Washington Times*. Although over two million refugees have left Iraq since April 2003, less than 800 have settled in the US, per government restrictions on admitting Iraqi refugees for fear that they may pose a national security threat. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) announced that nearly 7,000 Iraqis will be permitted to settle in the US by the end of September. The first 700 refugees are considered highly vulnerable in Iraq, and DHS has already conducted their resettlement interviews. The first 59 Iraqis to relocate will consist of former employees of the US government and their families. According to *The Washington Times*, the Iraqis will be eligible for the same “assistance from both government and private aid agencies, including language and job training in the communities that will be their new homes” as refugees from other countries. DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff acknowledges America’s history of accepting refugees and asylum-seekers, but qualified his remarks by emphasizing security precautions for refugees “from war-torn countries—especially countries infiltrated by large numbers of terrorists.” Although activists welcome the decision, the US government’s delay in accepting refugees, coupled with the crisis situation Iraqi refugees face in other Middle Eastern countries, have detracted from this development.

The Persian Gulf, and Dubai in particular, has capitalized on decreasing interest in US institutions and programs by becoming a booming center of European business programs. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, “a growing number of institutions,” among them London, Cass, and Manchester Business Schools, “are flying lecturers East” and

providing M.B.A. and executive programs for “the region’s many Middle Eastern and expatriate businesspeople.” Post-September 11 visa restrictions have lured business students and executives to Europe or European-based schools operating in the Persian Gulf, where flourishing expatriate communities and large numbers of English-speakers take advantage of the United Arab Emirates’ growing reputation as a commercial center. The UAE’s geographical position—close to Europe and Asia—has also attracted students. Emirati leaders have further promoted educational initiatives by “supporting the tax-free Dubai Knowledge Village campus, where

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many foreign universities” are located. Certain programs, including Cass’ curriculum, will offer courses in Islamic finance and energy and teach students “how to apply Muslim law to the modern business world,” in acknowledgement of the social and business norms of the Persian Gulf.

Russia and CNN Go Online While BBC Faces Cuts

State-owned news channel *Russia Today*, launched its first Arabic broadcast called *Rusiya Al-Yawm* (Russia Today) on May 31 to Muslim countries, reports *Monsters and Critics*. The channel’s expansion to the Arab market anticipates

an increase of “geopolitical significance of Russia’s relations with the Middle East.” Russia is the sole non-Muslim country to invite Hamas government officials on a state visit. According to Interfax, *Rusiya al-Yawm* will air twenty hours a day, seven days a week to a target audience of 350 million viewers. The channel’s director Yevgeny Sidorov explains that the station’s “main principle is that Russia is a multiethnic and multiconfessional country with a considerable Muslim population.”

Rusiya Al-Yawm follows in the footsteps of *BBC*, which launched its Arabic coverage this year. The *BBC* has encountered recent budget cuts, reports London’s *Telegraph*. Major budget cuts imposed by the British government have forced a five percent reduction of the news budget for the next five years. A senior reporter says, “We know these cuts are going to be savage and many people are pretty fatalistic about it...there will be a severe reduction in what we are able to do.” According to the *Telegraph*, *BBC* employees fear the company website—one of the most visited in the world—will bear the brunt of the budget cuts. *BBC* will have to “cut its three billion pound annual budget over the next six years.” Despite suffering budget setbacks, *BBC* recently provided its *News 24* program as a live stream in Britain, reports *Broadband TV News*.

In a break from requiring viewers to pay for the Pipeline service—a live stream of *CNN International* breaking news and assorted international broadcasters. *CNN* will also provide free live video on its website. According to *Broadband TV News*, the change will be implemented July 1 in an attempt to “head off criticism from cable operators who are unwilling to pay carriage fees if the same content was also available on the web.”

In other major network news, *Al-Jazeera* will not report from the Stanley Cup finals, *Sports Illustrated Online* reports. The NHL public relations department denied the Arab channel a press credential, despite the potential for the league to reach a “non-traditional hockey market.” *The Chicago Tribune* was also denied access.

Women Leaders Take

Initiatives Toward the Middle East

Monsters and Critics reported on a two-day conference that took place in Vienna on May 30-31 that sought to better define the role women should play in the Middle East peace process. The conference, entitled *Women Leaders: Networking for Peace and Security in the Middle East*, was hosted by Austrian Foreign Minister Ursula Plassnik, and boasted a number of prominent female leaders including US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, Israeli Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni, Palestinian Legislative Council member Hannan Ashrawi, and President of the UN General Assembly Sheikah Haya Rashed Al-Khalifa.

Plassnik noted that the participants were realistic about expectations for the region, acknowledging that the conference would not attempt to set a new plan for peace, but rather serve as a tool to increase dialogue within the region. Plassnik pointed out that proper networking and dialogue could help establish the difference between “crisis management” and “crisis solution” within the region.

In further public diplomacy news, *The Jordan Times* recounted a visit by Hadassah Lieberman, wife of US Senator Joseph Lieberman (I-CT), paid to the Microfund for Women, a microfinance lender that has been operating in Jordan for the last ten years. The group has granted more than 182,000 loans to female and male entrepreneurs throughout the country since its inception. Lieberman was accompanied by US ambassador to Jordan David Hale and was given a presentation detailing the services the Microfund for Women provides such as start-up, expansion and seasonal loans.

Arije Al Amad, General Manager of Microfund for Women noted that the activities of the lender have contributed not only to Jordan’s development, but have also helped combat unemployment and poverty.

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