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“Should the Arab News Media Matter Much for U.S. Public Diplomacy?”

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I want to start by reading from an interesting document with regard to the issue of U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East. It states, “We must seek to redirect the attention of the Arab peoples to their internal problems and to encourage them to devote their energies to the tremendous social and economic improvements so long overdue in their own countries. It may be pointed out that the Department of State is confronted with a critical public relations problem out on the home front as a result of which the Secretary and the other high officials have taken upon themselves to carry the Department story to the people through public speeches, articles, for publications, and personal contacts. This program on the home front is already producing favorable results. It might also prove effective in the field.” The document was signed on May 1, 1950 by U.S. Secretary of State Dean Acheson.

If you make some minor changes, this document is eerily contemporary. That gives you an idea that the problems we are facing now are not terribly new. Whether we are talking about public diplomacy, the Arab media, American media, or about the United States’ relations with the Arab world and the Muslim world, we are not discussing very new topics. A document like this gives you a shiver because it tells you how much we are still behind in dealing with issues that were raised in these pages 55 years ago.

When we observe the political discourse in the Arab and Muslim world, and in the United States since 9/11, one can conclude that Arabs do not do enough introspection when they discuss their sorry state of affairs and Americans do not do enough self-criticism when they discuss their relations with more than a billion-plus Arabs and Muslims in the world. That’s why I think recognizing this reality may be the beginning of a real dialogue between them. Before I discuss the

current situation and the perceptions of the media in the U.S. or in the Arab world, let me share a brief story of U.S.-Arab relations.

Morocco was the first Arab country, in fact the first country in the world, that recognized the young American republic. If we look at that relationship since then, we find much complexity. The promise of yesterday gave way to much disappointment and disillusionment. Once upon a time, in the Muslim and the Arab world, there existed a big reservoir of good will towards the young American republic. I am talking about the late 19th century till mid-20th century. America in the minds of the Arabs and Muslims was perceived as benign, progressive, and an enlightened power. It was the country that built the American University in Beirut (AUB) in the mid-1860s, a university that is going strong until now. Later, it built the American University in Cairo, the AUC. It was the country that proposed, through President Woodrow Wilson, the principles of self-determination for colonized people after World War I. America was a country of refuge and opportunity to thousands of Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians who came to it since the mid-1860s, who were welcome here, and who excelled in numerous fields. I am talking about such prominent people as Ralph Nader and George Mitchell. It was a tremendous experience for immigrants from that part of the world, and for America too.

I grew up in Beirut during the late 60s and early 70s and, after being introduced to American popular culture, was fascinated with the accounts of those Arab/American writers who came to this land and wrote about their enriching experience in the United States, both in English and in Arabic. America was seen in a positive light by generations of Arabs and Muslims. The most important reason why America was held in this high status by Arabs and Muslims was the fact that the US did not have a colonial legacy in the Arab and Muslim world. This is important because wherever you go in that part of the world people have a tremendous sense of history.

What went wrong? Many things. This is the question posed repeatedly by honest people who wanted to know after 9/11 what happened and what drove 19 young Arabs to visit their terror on New York and Washington that day. I am going to talk about problems that are basically political, not religious. In recent Melhem: “Should the Arab News Media Matter Much for U.S. Public Diplomacy?”

decades, if you asked the average Arab from Cairo or Damascus, “What is your problem with the United States? Why do you have a problem with the United States? Why you are critical of the United States?” The average answer by the man and woman in the street would tell you it’s Palestine or America’s unqualified support for Israel. The second-most important reason given is America’s support, through democratic and republican administrations, for Arab repressive and even totalitarian regimes, including that of Saddam Hussein during the 1980s. This has enhanced skepticism now at Bush’s pronouncements about democracy reform because, they say, that since the Second World War, the United States has not lived up to its political principles and its values. During the Cold War, the US supported leaders in the Arab and Muslim world who were horrendous the human rights of their people. In the 1990s, we had economic sanctions on Iraq and the US was the driving force behind these sanctions, which further harmed America’s image in the Arab world. Finally, among Arab intellectuals, there is a perception that globalization is nothing but the latest manifestation of an ongoing American hegemonic project.

These are political perceptions rooted in history, not in metaphysics or theology. Although the discourse in the Arab world, as is the discourse in parts of America, is at times soaked with religious terminology. What makes this discourse dangerous is that it claims absolute truth and hence the talk all over the place, here and in parts of the Arab world, is about a struggle between good and evil, black and white, as well as light and darkness. It is an absolutist language that they use, so, if you are not with us, you must be against us. This is a discourse that slips in every time you want to touch real issues. This discourse, by the way, is now the basis of the discussion of the issue of terrorism and what to do with terrorism and whether the US is pursuing it the right way or not.

Now, a few words about the Arab new media: Ever since the advent of the Arab satellite television phenomenon, specifically the emergence of Al Jazeera in the mid- 1990s and since the attacks of 9/11 and the rise of anti-Americanism in the Arab and Muslim world, the American media as well as the American government felt the need to understand how this new media is shaping the Arab streets. Observers hoped that this new media, which has revolutionized, Melhem: “Should the Arab News Media Matter Much for U.S. Public Diplomacy?”

technically at least, how Arabs receive news of their world and beyond, could lead to new politics. This is a question that is still mostly unanswered. Arabs, on the other hand, have been for years complaining about their negative image in the Western media in general. Although the quality of the coverage of things Arab and Muslim in mainstream media, particularly print media, has improved in recent years and most of the anti-Arab misrepresentation is expressed by some columnists and to a lesser extent editorial writers, in times of tension, crises or wars, some latent images are resurrected, dusted off, and used again. The American invasion of Iraq coming against the background of the Gulf War of 1991, devastating economic sanctions throughout the 1990s, the huge asymmetry of power between the US and Iraq, and the strong popular opposition to the war, led to a clash of media narratives about it: American narrative and Arab narrative. Arab and American media had appeared as if they were covering two very different wars. Differences were conceptual, linguistic, cultural, and political. They involved not only the push and pull of the market, which is essentially an American concern, but more fundamentally how media sees itself, its role in society, and its relationship with the powers that be.

Let me address briefly the characteristics and constraints on the Arab media. The UN 2003 Development Program stressed the shortcomings of the Arab media, whether we are talking about the old media, the print media, the regular media, or the so-called new media. The number of newspapers per 1,000 people varies from one country to another. Lebanon, which has the highest ratio when it comes to radio receivers (678 radio receivers per 1,000 people), is below the average of the high-income countries in the rest of the world. Middle-income Arab states have fewer television sets than other middle-income countries in the rest of the world, where the average is 275 TV sets per 1,000 people. The number of TV sets per 1,000 does not exceed in 67 Syria, 198 in Tunisia, and 198 in Egypt. There are now 150 Arab satellite channels, more than 70 of them are state enterprises, including Al-Jazeera. The media, old and new, lack credible, verifiable, and independent sources of information. Western news agencies, until now, are still the main source of information. Most of the media in the Arab

world lack adequate specialized reporters to cover topics such as finance, environment, law, medicine, and science.

The two, Arab and American media, operate under different tools. Issues of control, ownership, and censorship take on different meanings in those societies. Most media in the Arab world, including the most influential satellite television stations, are owned by governments or financed by wealthy individuals close to the ruling elites, which raises questions about the ability of this new media to help create new politics to hold regimes accountable for their actions or criticize their policies, let alone call for any meaningful change. Privately owned media does not mean free or independent media. In fact, in some Arab states the Ministry of Information is the one that appoints editors of privately owned newspapers. Most journalists practice self-censorship. Most of these media can criticize other regimes, not their own. Freedom to criticize corruption in general may be tolerated. Reporting on scandals involving embezzlement, abuse of power especially if it involves security agencies, the military, and naming names is prohibitively difficult and, at times, very costly.

This does not mean that the satellite phenomenon did not break barriers among Arab states or among Arab societies, or did not challenge social and political taboos and present the Arab world and the wider world beyond for the first time to Arabs in their language. The proliferation of Internet sites, which tend to be independent, has widened the circle of news and of views. Yet there is a negative, even debilitating, aspect to the satellite television phenomenon on Arab politics and Arab culture. They degraded the political discourse by false liberalism, contrived objectivity, and staged debates. Most swim with the tide and pay homage to worn out ideological political orthodoxies. Many of their programs adopted a sense of self-victimization that sees the outside world as the source of Arab failures. Instead of fostering healthy debates about the main causes of the current Arab malaise, in which the role of the US and of Israel is relevant, they vent steam, engage in outlandish conspiracy theories, and provide the government with safety valves to direct anger toward real or imagined foreign monsters. In the absence of open political processes, tolerant if not vibrant civil

societies, and the rule of law, the new media is not likely to contribute significantly to the emergence of new politics.

One cannot ignore the fact that satellite television has created what is now called a new public sphere for debates and dialogue, notwithstanding all the problems with this phenomenon. When elections occurred in Palestine and in Iraq, and recently demonstrations in Lebanon, notwithstanding the abnormal conditions under which the Palestinian and the Iraqi people went to the polls, many people participated in a process of which they knew their vote would count. Eight million have voted out of 14 million Iraqis registered to vote. In spite of the intimidation, the civil strife, and that the final arbiter is the United States' military power, millions of Arabs saw what was taking place in Palestine and Iraq. It became difficult for those people to question why 8 million Iraqis would go and vote. Surely these 8 million cannot be quislings for the Americans. Then, you had the strange event in the Arab world where a Prime Minister runs in elections and is found, when the votes are counted, to be a distant third. The president in the Palestinian elections received merely 62%. This is not in keeping with traditions of democracy, as manifested in Egypt, Syria, or Tunisia to cite a few examples, where the president runs unopposed. Saddam Hussein, one time ran and won 100%. The joke in the Arab world is that when a ruler receives support from 97% of the population, he is interested in getting the names of the 3% left. Notwithstanding the problems that marred these elections in Palestine and Iraq, millions were watching and wondering. One can interpret this by saying that these people in Iraq or Palestine are tired of their status as subjects. They believe that they can become citizens and engage in an act of empowerment. I heard Iraqis saying: we voted to say no to the occupation while under occupation because we voted for a political process that would lead American troops to withdraw and leave behind something half-decent. Many Arabs in their own homes took note of this unfamiliar political act.

In Lebanon peaceful demonstrations brought down a feeble, corrupt government without a shot being fired. The country was, during the 1970s and 80s, synonymous with chaos. In the 1970s, we gave the world the word "Lebanonization." For days in February 2005, Arab satellite stations covered Melhem: "Should the Arab News Media Matter Much for U.S. Public Diplomacy?"

these demonstrations, interviewed the people in the streets talking about their yearnings for freedom and fair elections, saying, “we are sick of corruption and tired of oppression.” That was not lost on some Arab rulers. That’s how one should see why the President of Egypt discovered something he didn’t want to accept before: that elections mean there is more than one candidate. Even the Saudis are toying with the idea of elections and said maybe in the next round of municipal elections women may be allowed to vote. I do not know whether President George W. Bush had these things in his mind when he decided to invade Iraq. I opposed the war in Iraq (just to be on the record on this one), but if it creates different dynamics and these dynamics lead to something positive, I cannot ignore that for a moment. This is a new era when it becomes very difficult for an autocratic regime to gun down its own people in the streets. One reason the Lebanese government, not the most democratic government in the world, did not shoot at unarmed demonstrators is that they knew that the world was watching, not just the Arab media but also the American and European media. That’s why there were signs in English at the demonstrations: because the people knew the world was watching. It has become difficult for rulers to conduct business as usual, hence, the importance of the satellite phenomenon.

In the old days, people used to say that Arab public opinion did not matter much because it did not have access to real information and was not politically organized. That is why it is better to deal with a few ruling elites, regardless of what people say. Arab public opinion does matter. Public opinion in general matters, even in autocratic regimes, and there are many ways of measuring the mood of people. Polling is just one way. We have been conducting opinion polls in the Arab world and there are many ways for people to show their displeasure with policies or with rulers. Because of this new public sphere provided to the Arabs by satellite media, there is a growing debate. People express and convey their views via the Internet. You have this new public sphere, which may not be as scientific as regular polling but it definitely gives a sense of what is going on; it gets you closer to the pulse of the real people and what they want.

I want to share with you now a critique of how Arab media and American media covered the Iraq War. With few exceptions, the Arab media sees its role as Melhem: “Should the Arab News Media Matter Much for U.S. Public Diplomacy?”

mobilizational media, articulating and defending the views of Arab governments, their interests, and the Arab causes, mainly the Palestinian cause. This was clear before the war in Iraq. What was dubbed by the US Government as “Operation Iraqi Freedom” and initially adopted uncritically by American media outlets such as CNN and Fox, was described in Arab media, including satellite stations such as Al-Jazeera and LBC, as an “aggression” or “invasion” to control Iraq’s oil and create an American empire in the Middle East. US media talked about war *in* Iraq. Arab media described an American war *against* Iraq. Many argue that the US media’s coverage of the pre-war period and early stages of the fighting displayed at times a sense of triumphalism and fascination with the wizardry of new weapon systems and the “Shock and Awe” campaign.

The role of the media blinded many journalists in the Arab world from seeing a complex picture, including their obligation to report facts, even when they are not good. They focused mainly, as they should, on the suffering of Iraqi civilians, the damage to the infrastructure, and showed close-up pictures of the maimed and the wounded, especially women and children. For many Arabs, the “shock and awe” was not just from an experience in precision bombing, but was from the great ease with which Baghdad, a city of 5.5 million people, fell. They could not believe US forces were on the outskirts of Baghdad. Many wanted to believe the lies of Iraq’s Information Minister, Muhammad al-Sahaf, who occupied the airwaves and was elevated by the Arab media outlets to the status of a star. Some conceded he was a clown, but they said also that he became a “symbol” of national resistance.

I want to say a few words about the American media that speaks Arabic, such as Al-Hurra television, created by the US government. I am not going to talk about radio SAWA which is a popular music kind of radio where young Arabs listen to music but turn off when the news begins. Al-Hurra is largely an ineffective initiative. Even before it began, there was a negative reaction on the part of many Arabs just because it was financed by the US Government. Arabs who do not trust their government-financed television stations are not going to trust an American-financed television station. They linked Al-Hurra to an attempt to improve the negative US image in the Arab and Muslim world and not Melhem: “Should the Arab News Media Matter Much for U.S. Public Diplomacy?”

necessarily to have a professional media outlet or a credible alternative. Then came a problematic recruitment of those who worked in it, sharing one political view and thus were not equipped to build bridges of understanding, explain the complexity of American society to the Arab world, and to interpret the Arabs to each other in a meaningful way.

A better approach would have been to engage Arab satellite stations, to challenge them when they report something wrong or when they claim something that is outlandish; to encourage Arab and American media to collaborate, give Arab media a greater access, not only to American officials, but to American society at large. It would have been better for Americans to use the public sphere in the Arab world to explain themselves, to respond to Arab critics regarding the war in Iraq and other policy issues, to use Arabic language, whether they like it or not. Ambassador Edward Djerejian, who was the head of a commission to study how US public diplomacy can be improved, kept reminding those inside and outside the US government that when the Afghanistan war started, there were five US officials who spoke Arabic fluently. That's scandalous.

Finally, when dealing with the Arab world, whether you are an American official or a media person, it would be useful to keep in mind few things: One is the tremendous diversity of the Arab world along political, cultural, and religious lines. Yes, it's true that this is a world dominated by Arabic language and culture and also dominated by Islam. But it is full of subgroups, subcultures, and ethnicities from Berbers in North Africa, marsh Arabs in southern Iraq, Armenians, Kurds in the high mountains. It has Muslims, Christians, and Jews. It is important to recall that it is a world of different colors, and the reality of Egypt is different than the reality of Yemen. It is important not to generalize too much about the Arabs. The second thing to keep in mind is the extent to which this region is still living in the shadow of colonialism and the impact of the bloody, stormy encounters between its inhabitants and Europeans in modern history. We are still dealing with the effects of the creation of Israel, especially the people in the immediate neighborhood, Egyptians, Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians and Jordanians. This doesn't mean that Arab rulers do not abuse the Palestinians. However, the Palestinian issue remains important for the societies in the

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neighborhood. One reason Bin Laden evokes Palestine is that he knows that it resonates well with many Arabs and Muslims.