Disconnected Narratives between the United States and Global Muslim Communities

CONVENED BY:
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AUTHORED BY:
Anne Hagood
Ambassador Marc Ginsberg

SABAN CENTER

at BROOKINGS

AUGUST 2011

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For the first time in its eight-year history, the 2011 U.S.-Islamic World Forum was held in Washington, DC. The Forum, co-convened annually by the Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World and the State of Qatar, once again served as the premier convening body for key leaders from government, civil society, academia, business, religious communities, and the media. For three days, Forum participants gathered to discuss some of the most pressing issues facing the relationship between the United States and global Muslim communities.

This year, the Forum featured a variety of different platforms for thoughtful discussion and constructive engagement, including televised plenary sessions with prominent international figures on broad thematic issues of global importance; smaller roundtable discussions led by experts and policymakers on a particular theme or set of countries; and working groups which brought together practitioners in a given field several times during the course of the Forum to develop practical partnerships and policy recommendations. For detailed proceedings of the Forum, including photographs, video coverage, and transcripts, please visit our website at http://www.usislamicworldforum.org.

Each of the five working groups focused on a different thematic issue, highlighting the multiple ways in which the United States and global Muslim communities interact with each other. This year's working groups included: "America and the Muslim World: The Tale of Two Media," "The Roles of Muslim-Majority and Muslim-Minority Communities in a Global Context," "Higher Education Reform in the Arab World," "The Role of Entrepreneurship and Job Creation in U.S.-Muslim Relations," and "Developing Leadership and Capacity in the Muslim Nonprofit Sector as a Building Block for Sustaining Partnerships and Change."

We are pleased to share with you the first of our five working group papers, "Disconnected Narratives between the United States and Global Muslim Communities." Please note that the opinions reflected in the paper and any recommendations contained herein are solely the views of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the participants of the working groups or the Brookings Institution. All of the working group papers will also be available on our website.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the State of Qatar for its partnership and vision in convening the Forum in partnership with us. In particular, we thank the Emir of Qatar, HRH Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani; the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of Qatar, HE Sheikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al-Thani; the Assistant Foreign Minister for Follow-up Affairs, HE Mohammad Abdullah Mutib Al-Rumaihi; and the entire staff of the Permanent Committee for Organizing Conferences at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for their support and dedication in organizing the Forum.

Sincerely,

Dr. Stephen R. Grand
Fellow and Director
Project on U.S. Relations with
the Islamic World

Durriya Badani
Deputy Director
Project on U.S. Relations with
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In the era of social networking, visual media are still the most powerful tools in shaping and influencing public opinion. This media working group, convened at the 2011 U.S.-Islamic World Forum in Washington, DC, was composed of insightful academic and business leaders, media experts, and public diplomacy practitioners from throughout the United States and the Muslim world. They sought to identify new initiatives to promote greater visual media programming to redress cross-cultural misunderstandings between the United States and global Muslim communities.

The working group analyzed and explored new opportunities to change the discourse that exacerbates stereotypes. One of the contributing factors identified as promoting these erroneous stereotypes is editorializing in news reporting, which tends to reflect the tense relationship between the United States and the Muslim world. The working group also explored how nonprofit media initiatives can play a positive role in shaping public perceptions of the "other," while acknowledging that the nonprofit sector is limited in its capacity because of financial restrictions.

This paper takes the debate a step further by analyzing the media landscape through a practical lens, and by asking how partnerships can be developed to leverage public-private initiatives to promote a more open environment that can correct stereotypes and lead to better understanding. The working group participants also came up with other platforms to challenge preconceived notions and put forward a series of recommendations that address issues related to methodology, market calibration, and media training initiatives. The full set of recommendations is presented at the end of this paper.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the working group members whose expertise in the field and keen understanding of media markets underpin the content of this report. We would also like to thank Heather Stephenson for her feedback, suggestions, and vision to help bring this project to fruition; Layalina's team for its support; and especially Akram Al-Turk at the Brookings Institution for his patience and guidance during the editing process.

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Convener

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Marc Ginsberg is Senior Vice President at APCO Worldwide, where he is responsible for coordinating global business diplomacy development and business planning for the company throughout the Middle East. Ambassador Ginsberg serves as a special adviser to the U.S. Department of Defence Special Operations Command and an adviser to the White House on outreach initiatives to the Muslim world. He is a Middle East media affairs analyst for major U.S. and international media outlets, including CNN, MSNBC, BBC, and Al Arabiya. He also serves as President of Layalina Productions. He served as a legislative assistant to Senator Edward Kennedy, a special assistant to the secretary of state, a deputy senior adviser to the president for Middle East policy, the U.S. Ambassador to Morocco, and Special U.S. Coordinator for Mediterranean trade, investment, and security affairs. He is an adjunct lecturer at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and serves on several distinguished boards of directors, including the Rand Corporation and the AARP Foundation.

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INTRODUCTION

"The popular caricature of the average Arab is as mythical as the old portrait of the Jew. He is robed and turbaned, sinister and dangerous, engaged mainly in hijacking airplanes and blowing up public buildings. It seems that the human race cannot discriminate between a tiny minority of persons who may be objectionable and the ethnic strain from which they spring. If the Italians have the Mafia, all Italians are suspect; if the Jews have financiers, all Jews are part of an international conspiracy; if the Arabs have fanatics, all Arabs are violent. In the world today, more than ever, barriers of this kind must be broken, for we are all more alike than we are different."[1]

Media stereotypes have long sanctioned the respective images that (non-Muslim) Americans and Muslims have of each other. Issues pertaining to violence, terrorism, security, and conflict have shaped the dynamic of this relationship, and 9/11 considerably exacerbated each side's preconceived and erroneous notions about one another. While these issues have at times reflected geopolitical realities, they have also fueled resentment, particularly through visual media. This is especially true in the context of counterterrorism, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the growing threats of a potentially nuclear Iran, and the political instability in the Arab world. America's relationship with the Muslim world is consequently often portrayed as polarized, where Islam is incompatible with democratic values and where America adopts a hostile stance toward Islam.

In reality, both sides are trapped in a paradigm, bolstered by the media, of false images and commonly held stereotypes—rooted in the belief that each harbors destructive intentions against the other—which thereby aggravates distrust and fear. This is not to say that all media on both sides devote, whether consciously or not, some of their programming to perpetuating these misconceptions. There have been positive initiatives to combat long-held mistrustful stereotypes. However, the more successful of these efforts are from the nonprofit sector, which is severely constrained by financial realities and the recent economic downturn. Moreover, the nonprofit sector's outreach and impact remain difficult and costly to measure.

Much of the Muslim world lacks an independent media environment. The rapid increase in the number of satellite television channels in the last ten years has made the medium the most widely viewed among all socioeconomic segments of society. However, cut-throat competition among these media outlets sometimes fosters an environment of sensationalism, which tends to perpetuate stereotypes.

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[1] Sydney Harris, "The World Shrinks and Stereotypes Fall," *Detroit Free Press*, April 11, 1986.

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In the United States, national security concerns and the recent Congressional hearings on the radicalization of Muslims in the country[2] have encouraged egregious commentaries about Muslims in numerous American media outlets. For example, a common theme in American media reporting is that Muslims are not taking a proactive enough stance to denounce terrorism or extremism. Initiatives such as the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) reinforce this notion by posting and translating carefully selected samples of anti-American or extremist comments in Arab media broadcasts, without providing context—suggesting that such views are prevalent among mainstream Muslim communities.

Despite numerous initiatives to engage with the Muslim world, including from the White House, the dialogue between the United States and global Muslim communities remains stunted by the lack of concrete acknowledgement of the issues faced by these global communities. The Obama administration's lack of meaningful policy initiatives after the president's 2009 Cairo speech caused a decline in his popularity and perpetuated negative perceptions of America's image in the Muslim world. The number of Arabs surveyed across the Middle East with positive views of America fell from 45 percent in 2009 to 20 percent in 2010. Sixty-three percent of those polled in 2010 felt discouraged with the United States, citing the contentious Israeli-Palestinian issue as the greatest policy of disappointment.[3] More recently, much of the Muslim world viewed the president's May 2011 speech on U.S. policy toward the Middle East as catering to domestic constituencies, and the speech was largely ignored.[4]

Although media outlets can incite violence, they also have the ability to foster peace and stability. Visual media have the capacity to act as mechanisms to prevent, resolve, or mitigate conflicts, to promote a sense of shared purpose, and to encourage an open dialogue. Investments in media initiatives by the nonprofit sector have largely promoted cross-cultural and interfaith exchanges mutually beneficial to the United States and the Muslim world. Although there was hope that donor investments would help promote a free and independent environment to support social and political changes, the lack of a coordinated media strategy between the private and public sectors has failed to successfully mitigate tensions. In addition, the media market structure is such that it is dominated by the advertising market, leaving little room for original programming that can challenge the preconceived stereotypes of viewers.

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[2] Chris Michaud, "Muslims, Supporters Protest Congressional Hearing," *Reuters*, March 6, 2011, http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/06/us-muslim-protest-idUSTRE7252VY20110306.

[3] Shibley Telhami, "2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll: Results of Arab Opinion Survey Conducted June 29-July 20, 2010" (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, August 5, 2010), http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2010/0805_arab_opinion_poll_telhami.aspx.

[4] Uri Friedman, "Live Reactions to Obama's Middle East Speech," *The Atlantic Wire*, May 19, 2011, http://www.theatlanticwire.com/global/2011/05/obamas-middle-east-speech/37925.

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Stereotypes, Narratives, and the Role of Visual Media

Why Focus on Visual Media?

Visual media broadcast subtle messages about race, ethnicity, gender, and class. For most people, these messages are particularly potent as the foundations of attitudes toward others are formed through the prism of visual media. Commonly held assumptions are supported and often created by visual media stories, which can exacerbate and sometimes normalize misrepresentations and stereotypes of the "other." And for audiences who are uneducated about other cultures, visual media plays an even more powerful role in shaping their views. Television is especially powerful, as it can engender emotions that are often ill-informed and incompatible with reality. Because of their wide reach, visual media have had a profound impact on U.S.-Muslim world relations.

In the United States, a popular caricature of the average Muslim is that of a sinister and dangerous person, engaged in acts of violence to destroy the United States. While this image was already imbued in America's collective psyche well before 9/11,[5] the terrorist attacks on that day propelled it to a new level. This image, disseminated through movies and television series, contributes to ignorance of Muslims' realities. As media critic Jack Shaheen remarked in 2000, stereotyping of Muslim Arabs "has reached a point where even members of our government have come to embrace it as well as audiences."[6] More importantly, the lack of an alternative discourse in mainstream American media bolsters preconceived hostilities of Islam and Muslims.

American news organizations have a tendency to cater to specific audiences and oftentimes editorialize and report selectively. For example, in the case of the cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed, little attention was given to the fact that while many Muslims were angered over the disrespectful illustrations, a greater number sought an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with the West to explain their grievances. Instead, the media only focused on the few isolated cases in which Muslims threatened retaliatory violence, suggesting to mainstream audiences that these few were representative of the Muslim world at large.

Similarly, media in the Muslim world predominantly portray images of the United States as an occupying power that threatens Muslim principles and ideals. These unchallenged stereotypes foster much resentment and hostile reactions that are often misunderstood in the West. Arab media—in all of its genres—widely disseminates distorted images

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[5] See, for example, *Frantic* (1985), *True Lies* (1994), *Rules of Engagement* (2000), *The Kingdom* (2007), *Lions for Lambs* (2007), or the TV series *24*, to name a few.

[6] "Arab Americans Call for Boycott of *Rules of Engagement*," *CNN*, April 25, 2000, http://articles.cnn.com/2000-04-25/entertainment/rules. of.engagement_1_arab-states-united-arab-emirates-film-distribution?_s=PM:SHOWBIZ.

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of the United States, often contextualized within political or anti-Semitic discourse. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the rhetoric of the Bush administration, the debate on the proposed Cordoba House/Park 51 project in lower Manhattan, and the Obama administration's policies toward the Middle East have done little to dispel these erroneous ideas.

Similarly, although extremists do not appeal to all segments of society for what they embody, groups like the Taliban discuss—albeit in a Manichean manner—issues (e.g., Palestinian affairs and the conflict in Kashmir) that emphasize a narrative of victimization and martyrdom, which echoes powerfully across Muslim societies. Even though audiences may not agree with the use of violence, this emphasis allows extremists to muster support to their cause based on a discourse of common experience, while vilifying the United States.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE "OTHER"

The need to reinvent a narrative to bolster cross-cultural understanding through the media is more important than ever, but also more feasible today given the breadth of tools and technology available to reach people on a visual platform. Unfortunately, American and Arab media tend to not challenge the preconceived stereotypes and expectations of audiences, and therefore rhetoric has only intensified in both western and Arab media. In light of how the media portrays reactions to news developments in certain countries, one might expect respondents in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United States to consider increased contact with the "other" a threat. Interestingly, a recent poll revealed that the opposite was true—63, 65, and 76 percent, respectively, said that greater interaction is a benefit.[7]

A 2010 Arab public opinion poll conducted by the University of Maryland, in conjunction with Zogby International, showed that 39 percent of Arabs polled designated their faith as the most important part of their identity.[8] In addition, 47 percent of the respondents stated that they watch American or European movies on a daily basis, and are therefore exposed to western mainstream pop culture and its stereotypes.

Furthermore, according to a Gallup survey entitled *Measuring the State of Muslim-West Relations*, when asked what the West could do to improve relations with Muslim-majority communities, those polled overwhelmingly responded: "respect Islam." Seventy-two percent of Muslims said abstaining from desecrating Islam's holy book and Muslim religious symbols would be very meaningful to them. Those polled also defined respect as being treated fairly in policies that affect them (54 percent) and portraying Muslim movie characters in an accurate or more positive manner (49 percent).[9]

Entertainment programming has been a powerful tool not only in exploring preconceived stereotypes but also in challenging them. Disseminated widely, the media reach all segments of society where the audiences identify either with the idea or with the object of the stereotyping. Media can provide audiences with a better understanding of the sources of preconceived stereotypes. A more realistic assessment of a given society allows for a more sympathetic view of the "other." Unfortunately, there is a dearth of programming that humanizes the "other" in Muslim and American societies, mainly due to a profound lack of understanding of both communities. The recent Arab Spring and the subsequent reaction of American media in reporting the events exemplify this.

While most people across the Muslim world are attracted to the United States and its people, U.S. foreign policy is hugely unpopular and fosters resentment. Foreign policy decisions have often nullified public diplomacy initiatives and positive

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[7] Silatech, "The Silatech Index: Voices of Young Arabs" (Silatech, November 2010), http://www.silatech.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=271:the-silatech-index-november-2010&catid=25:the-silatech-index&Itemid=29.

[8] Telhami, "2010 Arab Public Opinion Poll."

[9] Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, "Measuring the State of Muslim-West Relations: Assessing the 'New Beginning'" (Abu Dhabi Gallup Center, November 28, 2010), http://www.gallup.com/poll/144959/measuring-state-muslim-west-relations.aspx.

engagements with the Muslim world. More consistent policies would be pivotal to achieving and maintaining credibility in Muslim communities. Media outlets can exacerbate the situation by not challenging the perceived double standards of U.S. foreign policy in the Muslim world. While a shift in policy—though not always possible—is necessary, better communication regarding the intent of media outlets is essential to improving public opinion in Muslim societies.

CASE STUDY: PAKISTAN

An examination of the media environment in Pakistan, a Muslim-majority country that is often in the news in the United States, helps illustrate some of the points above. Pakistan's media coverage of extremism, the war in Afghanistan, and Pakistan-U.S. relations is perceived by some in the United States as biased and inaccurate, if not hostile. Outside observers, such as the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), have criticized Pakistani media outlets for portraying too negative a picture of the Pakistan-U.S. bilateral relationship and for their seeming reluctance to take a stance against extremist forces.

According to Hannah Byam and Christopher Neu at USIP, the particularities of Pakistan's social and political climate are reflected in a "mediascape grappling with how best to cover domestic terrorism and Pakistan-U.S. relations."[10] Pakistani television boasts twenty-six channels, half of which broadcast twenty-four hours a day. But most of the programming consists of shows that feature a group of middle-aged men who discuss political conspiracies, while the rest of the programming is mainly entertainment. In their recommendations, Byam and Neu note that Pakistan's media must balance domestic pressure for sensationalist content with the need for professional standards and reform, while also competing with extremist rhetoric.[11] According to Pakistani American Wajahat Ali, author of *The Domestic Crusader*, there is a pressing need for a "grand strategy" which incorporates the demands of viewers and readers with professional ethics and sensitivity to promoting moderation in political thought.[12]

According to Wajahat, the Pakistani media's ongoing negative coverage of Pakistan-U.S. relations may be less of an issue with the structure of the media and more a reflection of the two countries' narrowly defined political relationship. As both countries are primarily concerned with security issues and are opaque in their negotiations on these matters, the Pakistani media, such as Geo TV and Dunya (two popular, privately owned channels), often only report on the limited information available. Although some outlets deliberately stoke anti-U.S. sentiment for the sake of sensationalism, the opportunities to do so stem from an information vacuum. At the same time, some of the American media's coverage of Pakistan is equally negative, suspicious, and accusatory. The tone of the partisan presses in both countries reflects the divide between the United States and Pakistan governments on virtually all bilateral issues.

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[10] Hannah Byam and Christopher Neu, "Covering and Countering Extremism in Pakistan's Developing Media" (Peace Brief 82, United States Institute of Peace, Washington, DC, March 3, 2010), http://www.usip.org/files/resources/Covering_and_Countering_Extremism_in_Pakistan%E2%80%99s_Developing_Media.pdf.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

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What Role for the Nonprofit and Public Sectors?

One of the most significant challenges in developing programming content that would redress stereotypes and misconceptions is the absence of a private sector presence and a lack of funding. Other challenges include winning "hearts and minds" while promoting independent journalism, addressing hate speech and inflammatory journalism, overhauling media regulation, coordinating the activities of external and internal players, and ensuring a viable media environment.

American government-funded media nonprofit initiatives, such as Al-Hurra, were started with great promise and great taxpayer expenditure to counter anti-American sentiment. However, some have questioned the choice of the channel's programming, the content of its broadcast, and its management. The channel did not fare much better among its target audience. For example, Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Khudairi, a Saudi cleric, issued a fatwa forbidding Muslims from watching Al-Hurra, stating that the channel was "founded by America to fight Islam, and to propagate massive decay to Americanise the world."[13]

In addition, most people in the Muslim world have a profound distrust of any state-owned media due to experiences with their own countries' state-funded media.[14] Since part of the problem is rooted in a socio-cultural context, it is difficult to influence perception or have an impact on audiences when they traditionally regard media outlets as government mouthpieces. While satellite television and the internet have diminished the power of state media in the Arab world, the lack of content regulation signifies that much of what is broadcast remains motivated by the owner's or broadcaster's agenda. Therefore, Arab audiences often perceive U.S.-funded media initiatives as tools to defend and promote America's strategic interests—which is sometimes the case—rather than attempts to engage in interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue.[15]

Others have understood the importance of cultural subtlety with Muslim audiences. In fact, the most powerful type of programming in the Arab world is "dramatic series," mostly imported from Turkey and dubbed into Arabic. These series present the audience with a hybrid narrative and social values that echo the reality of millions of Muslims across

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[13] "Saudi Clerics Forbid Muslims to Watch US Arabic Channel," *The Straits Times*, March 8, 2004, http://www.asiamedia.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=8702.

[14] Zoe Holman, "Future Bleak for State-Owned Arab Media," *Institute for War & Peace Reporting*, April 21, 2011, http://iwpr.net/report-news/future-bleak-state-owned-arab-media.

[15] Nonetheless, some viewers credit Al-Hurra for being fairly balanced, pointing to the channel's reporting—including that of the alleged abuses at Guantanamo Bay—which portrays the United States in a negative light.

the Arab world. Turkish soap operas meet the modern aspirations of Muslim youth while tackling taboo subjects within an Islamic societal framework that allows the audience to identify with the characters. Such an approach has been considerably absent in American public diplomacy television programming. In trying to quell or avoid criticism from various constituencies or interest groups in Washington, DC, American programming for public diplomacy purposes is too diluted to ring true to Muslim communities. The inability of this type of programming to incorporate Islamic values into broader American cultural norms has made it difficult for Muslim audiences to identify with the series' protagonists.

THE NONPROFIT SECTOR: PARTNERSHIP IN SIGHT?

Nonprofit public diplomacy media initiatives have produced valuable programming focused on conflict resolution, civil society development, and increased cross-cultural understanding between the Arab world and the United States.[16] International broadcasters based in the United States could benefit from informal contacts with these nonprofits, potential producers, and grant-making foundations such as the Foundation for International Understanding.[17]

Numerous initiatives led by the nonprofit sector have generated positive results. For example, the Independent Television Service (ITVS) receives significant funding from the U.S. government, but unlike Al-Hurra, the organization funds independent producers who tackle complex issues and express a variety of views not typically found in mainstream media. ITVS, according to its mission statement, "brings independently produced, high-quality public broadcast and new media programs to local, national, and international audiences." ITVS's stated intent is to "enrich the cultural landscape with the voices and visions of underrepresented communities, and reflect the interests and concerns of a diverse society."[18]

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[16] These nonprofit initiatives include America Abroad Media, Common Ground Productions, and Layalina Productions.
[17] "Foundation for International Understanding," University of Southern California Center on Public Diplomacy, accessed July 11, 2011, http://uscpublicdiplomacy.org/index.php/projects/fiu.
[18] "About ITVS," The Independent Television Service, accessed July 11, 2011, http://www.itvs.org/about.

The Media Market and its Challenging Business Model

Surviving the Market

The broadcasting industries in the Arab world and Pakistan are currently dominated by the free-to-air (FTA) sector, with close to six hundred channels available on satellite just in the Arab world. Satellite channels revitalized the pan-Arab media market. Before the satellite channel boom, local media outlets dominated, and therefore marketers could only plan locally and had to replicate their strategies in other markets. Pan-Arab satellite channels changed the nature of marketing and were able to attract more advertisers.[19]

Pan-Arab satellite channels also consolidated the individual Arab media markets and attracted audiences by providing new, bold, and sometimes controversial programming. These programs have, more than local state-owned television channels, generated revenue and had an impact on cultural values, even in conservative societies. For example, in Saudi Arabia, local and international companies compete for advertising space on LBC's *Ya Leil Ya Ain*, a culturally liberal program. Further, a Saudi company has sponsored Al-Jazeera's *Al-Ittijah Al-Muakis*, a controversial political talk show.[20]

Live and pre-recorded talk shows have also been popular in the Arab world, especially with audiences who are unable to voice their opinions. Live programs, talk shows, and game shows are widespread because they are cheaper to produce. The saturation of available channels has provided the pan-Arab audience with a variety of genres and content types. While the majority are still "general interest" channels, there is also a growing number of specialized channels catering to different segments of the Arab world. In particular, religious channels make up the second highest number of channels after "general interest," with forty-five religious channels available in 2009.[21]

The success of satellite channels, whether privately or semi-privately owned, has led to attempts by local state-owned channels—which are rarely viewed outside their respective markets—to change and repackage their programming. These attempts, however, have had little success, mainly because it is much more difficult to rebrand a channel than to merely repackage its programming. Whereas the latter option may simply require new faces and additional funding, the former requires the full use of marketing tools, which Arab governments often tend to overlook or dismiss.

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[19] Jihad Fakhreddine, "Pan-Arab Satellite Television: Now the Survival Part," Allied Media Corp., accessed July 11, 2011, http://www.allied-media.com/ARABTV/pan-arab-sat.htm.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Dubai Press Club, "Arab Media Outlook 2009-2013: Inspiring Local Content" (Dubai Press Club, February 2010), http://www.fas.org/irp/eprint/arabmedia.pdf.

The Economics of the Arab Media Industry

The American private sector does not heavily invest in the Pakistani and pan-Arab media industries, since they are characterized as throw-away markets for Hollywood, due to their low licensing fees and underdeveloped advertising market. Although there are no precise figures, the Arab television production industry lacks the necessary financial resources. The Middle East and North Africa has 330 million Arabic speakers, with a pan-Arab satellite television penetration rate of around 96 percent, yet spending on advertising remains extraordinarily low—$2.1 billion. According to the Arab Media Outlook 2009-2013 report, 95 percent of TV households access free programs.[22]

A couple of factors explain the lack of advertising revenue. First, many Arab audiences, rather than paying a premium, prefer to wait several months to watch newly released content, including Hollywood movies, for free. This is in part due to the problem of piracy and the lack of intellectual property protection. Second, the abundance of satellite channels and the fact that not all channels are run for purely commercial reasons constrain those channels which are trying to make a profit, especially since there is much competition for viewership.

The mediocre advertising income means that pan-Arab channels have small budgets for the production of original programs and even smaller budgets for the acquisition of programs available to be licensed under syndication schemes. Therefore, there is little opportunity to challenge stereotypes or promote content that bolsters interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue. Further, movies made for American audiences do not always translate well to other cultures, as they are often not in tune with the cultural and societal norms of foreign audiences. And given the prevalence of stereotypes regarding Muslims in American movies, Muslim audiences perceive this inaccurate depiction as a sign of hostility. Rather than seeing Hollywood's simplifications of complex issues as cost-saving measures and a creative contextualization, Muslims understandably interpret them as malevolent and preordained attacks on Arab dignity and societal norms. Consequently, this leaves a vacuum for groups that harbor an agenda, motivated by political incentives rather than by a potential profit from programming. This is how radical groups, such as Hezbollah, are able to penetrate the airwaves and, subsequently, millions of homes with their propaganda.

The unavailability of Arab television shows and news channels in the United States (and the political reasons for that lack of availability) prevents Americans' negative images of the Muslim world from being challenged. For example, Al-Jazeera English was launched in 2006 in Washington, DC, but has not been able to persuade American cable companies to offer the channel to their customers. This is in part due to cable providers' resistance to the "Al-Jazeera" brand name, fearful of the potential backlash from advertisers. Tony Burman, head of North American strategies for Al-Jazeera English and former editor-in-chief of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, notes that, in addition to financial considerations, cable providers have objected for political reasons. Noting the Bush administration's public hostility toward the network, Burman said, "In 2006, pre-Obama, the experience was a challenging one. Essentially this was a period when a lot of negative stereotypes were associated with Al Jazeera."[23]

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[22] Ibid.

[23] Ryan Grim, "Al Jazeera English Blacked Out Across Most of U.S.," *The Huffington Post*, April 1, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/01/30/al-jazeera-english-us_n_816030.html.

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Recommendations

After the working group's participants analyzed and explored the current media environment, they discussed new opportunities to bridge the divide between American and Muslim communities' narratives regarding one another. The group identified editorialization, lack of effective media training, and financial restrictions as major challenges and consequently suggested the following recommendations to empower local narratives and explore new methodologies.

Shift perceptions and engage in dialogue

Uneven yet unmistakable American support for the Arab Spring's youth movements echo with American ideals and history, from the American Revolution to the civil rights movement. Yet, the euphoria in early 2011 has quickly turned to a growing fear of Islamists taking over, a sentiment manifest in the American media's coverage. Many Muslims view this American perspective as a double standard and a simplification of more complex political issues.

A major challenge is the gap between substantive narrative and the media industry's inclination, in the age of Twitter, toward simplification, which can lead to a lack of understanding of Islam in the West. There is also a need for self-criticism and increased dialogue among Muslim communities to challenge stereotypes and reclaim a narrative that has been effaced by internecine conflicts, a lack of pluralism, mediocre education systems based on rote memorization,

authoritarian political systems, and extremism. This is not only important for Muslim communities, but also for the West to better grapple with the intricate realities of the Muslim world and accordingly determine a course of engagement. Eventually, the media will adjust their messages to societal and political changes.

Use the Sabido method to educate viewers and influence perceptions

Audiences are more inclined to watch programming that corroborates or perpetuates what they believe and therefore tend to select content that fits with their worldview. Seldom do viewers actively seek a program that will challenge their views. There is, therefore, a real need to adapt the media to have an influence on targeted segments of the population. The use of the Sabido method has proven very efficient in effecting societal changes. The Sabido method, originally created by Miguel Sabido in Mexico, is an entertainment-education approach that contributes to the creation and production of serial dramas on television and radio to promote social development.

The method tackles sensitive subjects, including sex, family planning, and extremism, conveys positive messages and values, and is based on character development and interesting plot lines. Because the Sabido method imparts positive values through the development of characters with whom audiences can identify, it has been successful in attracting a

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large number of viewers and stimulating discussion. And therefore, public opinion begins to transform as the main characters become transitional role models.

Whether in the form of comedy or drama and whether intended for Muslim communities or audiences in the United States, the key element is that viewers should be able to identify with and see the evolution of nuanced characters. Shows that are aimed at fostering understanding should use the Sabido method to ensure that their programmatic outreach is replicable and measurable and based on pre-broadcast audience needs and post-broadcast audience evaluation.

Redefine the role of the nonprofit sector in the Arab media market

Numerous initiatives led by the nonprofit sector have been able to generate positive results. However, the impact that they have had so far remains limited due to financial constraints caused by the recent economic downturn. The lack of adequate funding, advertising, and broadcasters to foster a competitive environment where programs could be attractive products is a major obstacle. Further, the advertising market in the Middle East and North Africa region is not well-developed, which means that pan-Arab free-to-air satellite stations are unable to acquire thoughtful and interesting shows, many of which are produced in the nonprofit sector.

Create powerful, educational media platforms

Muslim televangelists, using many of the techniques used by their Christian counterparts, are gaining popularity among young, upper-middle-class Arabs. Unfortunately, messages are often tailored to a particular constituency. Religious channels, however, should not be the only platform to educate people about Islam. While educating Americans about Islam would be a positive step, educating Muslims about their own religion outside of a politicized environment is key to challenging stereotypes and fostering a deeper understanding about the "other." Access to education and information is

also needed to counter stereotypes, not only about Muslims to Americans, but also about Americans and Islam among Muslims.

The United States does not necessarily need to educate the Muslim world about America. The eventual aim is to deter people from resorting to violence as an option, while exploring possible venues for dialogue. The promotion of television spots or series openly denouncing terrorism may resonate with American security concerns but not the daily preoccupation of Muslim communities who are concerned about unemployment, education, gender and social issues, human rights, and radicalization.

Muslim communities share the same preoccupations that western communities do, yet addressing these issues must be done in a carefully crafted framework in tune with religious sensitivities and socio-cultural environments. Broadcasting dialogues and educational programming about Islam through the conduit of a nonprofit or a private sector company targeting Muslim communities and Americans would educate Muslims and non-Muslims about Islam and demonstrate to Muslims worldwide that American society is comfortable with their faith.

Encourage co-productions between American and Muslim media companies as an avenue for cross-cultural dialogue

The underlying economics of the Arab media market is an irrational one, in that it keeps growing at an astronomical rate and operates in a capitalistic environment, yet does not generate any profit (with few exceptions). Co-productions between Arab and Americans producers are necessary to refocus the media market, streamline it, and offer surviving networks the purchasing power in terms of productions. They would enable media groups to gain from one another's experiences in movie production, television, news media, and technology. Eventually, these collaborations could contribute to building Arab and American media companies' presence throughout the Muslim world and abroad, and offer opportunities to broadcast co-productions

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that would foster interfaith and cross-cultural dialogue. The combination of cultural sensitivity and Hollywood-like production expertise could greatly benefit both sides in the long term.

The cultural insensitivities in American entertainment programming reinforce the notion among Muslims of a disconnect between America and global Muslim communities. Co-productions involving Americans and Muslims would encourage dialogue and address stereotypes. It would be imperative to fund local production companies who would work in partnership with American agencies or productions to boost credibility and improve the quality of exchange and understanding.

It is also essential to imbed indirect cultural messages in a nuanced manner—seeking to address issues affecting both the United States and Muslim communities—and present familiar scenes to the audience to maximize acceptance and credibility. Programs targeted at Muslim audiences must include theological components to oppose voices that advocate violence. The private sector should help in developing local capacity and training individuals—actors, scriptwriters, and production staff—to tell their own stories. Doing so fosters an environment favorable to dialogue and interfaith understanding, amplifies voices in the community, and challenges long-standing stereotypes.

Producing joint productions or media initiatives that depict the everyday lives of Muslim immigrants in the United States or entertainment game shows that would explore stereotypes through humor would enable both sides to formulate these ideas in their own words and engage in dispelling those stereotypes with the "other." Humor becomes a tool to build a platform for self-expression that is easily approachable and understandable by all parties involved.

Build or work with institutions like the Nielsen Poll

The current polling done by Ipsos and its competitors that is widely used in the Arab world to measure audience shares remains imperfect and is less sophisticated than a Nielsen-type polling system. As a result, nonprofit organizations cannot prove how well-watched their programs are, and therefore can lose much-needed revenue. Further, licensors require American content providers to fund the up-front costs of production and then pay a small licensing fee. Moreover, all advertising revenues are kept by the licensor and not shared with the licensee. These financial impediments constitute an ever-present and growing obstacle to fully achieving the missions of these organizations and their potential to utilize media to build bridges of understanding and dialogue between the Muslim world and the United States.

The aforementioned Sabido method can also be used as a polling tool. While it may not provide concrete numbers, changes in societal norms can be assessed through surveys and focus groups. Aside from ratings, focus groups, media downloads statistics, and dispersion analysis, other adequate tools—including the use of new media—are needed to determine audience expectations and whether productions are meeting those expectations.

Implement media trainings

There is a great need for media trainings in digital filmmaking, programming, storytelling, and social media skills in developing countries that have recently deregulated their broadcasting sectors.[24] America should not only export "Hollywood" media but should also export media skills, which empower people to tell their own narratives and allow independent broadcasters to be influential members of

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[24] Working group members from Pakistan, Egypt, and Central Africa corroborated this.

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civil society. Trainings should be culturally sensitive and carried out with a local partner. Local partners in each country should form and host a consortium of stations and production companies to determine their training needs. Integral to all the trainings are journalistic best practices to empower the next generation of filmmakers and storytellers to heal their own cultures and promote cross-cultural dialogue.

For example, Visionaire Media implemented a successful training program in Afghanistan, in which teams of Americans came in for two-week intervals over a two-year period and considerably enhanced the production capacity, filmmaking, and programming skills of television stations in Kandahar. Additionally, these trainings were filmed and edited and then used as the core of ongoing pedagogy in which the trainees became the trainers in subsequent workshops. Similar initiatives could be implemented in South Asia and the Arab world.

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About the Brookings Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World

The Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World is a major research program housed within the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution. The project conducts high-quality public policy research, and convenes policy makers and opinion leaders on the major issues surrounding the relationship between the United States and the Muslim world. The Project seeks to engage and inform policymakers, practitioners, and the broader public on developments in Muslim countries and communities, and the nature of their relationship with the United States. Together with the affiliated Brookings Doha Center in Qatar, it sponsors a range of events, initiatives, research projects, and publications designed to educate, encourage frank dialogue, and build positive partnerships between the United States and the Muslim world. The Project has several interlocking components:

■ The U.S.-Islamic World Forum, which brings together key leaders in the fields of politics, business, media, academia, and civil society from across the Muslim world and the United States, for much needed discussion and dialogue;

■ A Visiting Fellows program, for scholars and journalists from the Muslim world to spend time researching and writing at Brookings in order to inform U.S. policy makers on key issues facing Muslim states and communities;

■ A series of Brookings Analysis Papers and Monographs that provide needed analysis of the vital issues of joint concern between the U.S. and the Muslim world;

■ An Arts and Culture Initiative, which seeks to develop a better understanding of how arts and cultural leaders and organizations can increase understanding between the United States and the global Muslim community;

■ A Science and Technology Initiative, which examines the role cooperative science and technology programs involving the U.S. and Muslim world can play in responding to regional development and education needs, as well as fostering positive relations;

■ A Faith Leaders Initiative which brings together representatives of the major Abrahamic faiths from the United States and the Muslim world to discuss actionable programs for bridging the religious divide;

■ A Brookings Institution Press Book Series, which aims to synthesize the project's findings for public dissemination.

The underlying goal of the Project is to continue the Brookings Institution's original mandate to serve as a bridge between scholarship and public policy. It seeks to bring new knowledge to the attention of decision-makers and opinion-leaders, as well as afford scholars, analysts, and the public a better insight into policy issues. The Project is supported through the generosity of a range of sponsors including the Government of the State of Qatar, The Ford Foundation, The Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation.

The Project Conveners are Martin Indyk, Vice President and Director of Foreign Policy Studies; Kenneth Pollack, Senior Fellow and Director, Saban Center; Bruce Riedel, Senior Fellow in the Saban Center; Stephen R. Grand, Fellow and Director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World; Shibley Telhami, Nonresident Senior Fellow and Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland; and Salman Shaikh, Director of the Brookings Doha Center.

About the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings

THE SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY was established on May 13, 2002 with an inaugural address by His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan. The creation of the Saban Center reflects the Brookings Institution's commitment to expand dramatically its research and analysis of Middle East policy issues at a time when the region has come to dominate the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

The Saban Center provides Washington policymakers with balanced, objective, in-depth and timely research and policy analysis from experienced and knowledgeable scholars who can bring fresh perspectives to bear on the critical problems of the Middle East. The center upholds the Brookings tradition of being open to a broad range of views. The Saban Center's central objective is to advance understanding of developments in the Middle East through policy-relevant scholarship and debate.

The center's foundation was made possible by a generous grant from Haim and Cheryl Saban of Los Angeles. Ambassador Martin S. Indyk, Vice President of Foreign Policy at Brookings, was the founding Director of the Saban Center. Kenneth M. Pollack is the center's Director. Within the Saban Center is a core group of Middle East experts who conduct original research and develop innovative programs to promote a better understanding of the policy choices facing American decision makers. They include Bruce Riedel, a specialist on counterterrorism, who served as a senior advisor to four presidents on the Middle East and South Asia at the National Security Council and during a twenty-nine year career in the CIA; Suzanne Maloney, a former senior State Department official who focuses on Iran and economic development; Daniel Byman, a Middle East terrorism expert from Georgetown University; Stephen R. Grand, Fellow and Director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World; Salman Shaikh, Fellow and Director of the Brookings Doha Center; Ibrahim Sharqieh, Fellow and Deputy Director of the Brookings Doha Center; Shadi Hamid, Fellow and Director of Research of the Brookings Doha Center; and Shibley Telhami, who holds the Sadat Chair at the University of Maryland. The center is located in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at Brookings.

The Saban Center is undertaking path breaking research in five areas: the implications of regime change in Iraq, including post-war nation-building and Gulf security; the dynamics of Iranian domestic politics and the threat of nuclear proliferation; mechanisms and requirements for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; policy for the war against terrorism, including the continuing challenge of state sponsorship of terrorism; and political and economic change in the Arab world, and the methods required to promote democratization.

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