

## ***New York Times* Journalist and Author Neil MacFarquhar on Strategic Communications with the Middle East**

A CNA Roundtable  
Alexandria, VA

June 8, 2009

*New York Times* U.N. Bureau Chief Neil MacFarquhar spoke at a CNA Roundtable on June 8. His recently-published book *The Media Relations Department of Hizbollah Wishes You a Happy Birthday: Unexpected Encounters in the Changing Middle East*, is an appreciation of the Arab world and Iran adjusting to the pressures of modernity and change. MacFarquhar grew up in Libya, the son of an oil company executive, and subsequently spent more than 13 years as a foreign correspondent in the Middle East, first with the Associated Press and later as Cairo Bureau Chief of the *New York Times*. He speaks Arabic.

### **Impact of President Obama's Cairo Speech:**

We asked Neil MacFarquhar to give us his initial assessment of the impact of President Obama's June 4 speech at Cairo University and probed for ideas on how to improve our strategic communications efforts in the region. State Department diplomat Dr. Nabel Khoury, who has served in several capitals in the Middle East, and Ambassador Chas W. Freeman Jr., former President of the Middle East Policy Council and now an advisor to CNA, contributed to the discussion.

Neil MacFarquhar noted that publics in the Middle East closely followed the U.S. presidential election campaign and were surprised, even elated, when Barack Obama won. MacFarquhar's Arab contacts were generally positive about the policy issues President Obama raised in his Cairo speech, at the same time questioning whether he will actually be able to deliver on his vision. They were pleased that he addressed the Muslim world and appreciated his respectful, non-confrontational tone. Neil MacFarquhar was especially struck by his friends' comments on Obama's physicality. "He looks like us. In a *jallabia* instead of a suit, he could have walked to Cairo University without his security detail." Unlike the region's geriatric leaders, they noted, Barack Obama bounded up onto the stage, radiating energy and optimism. In President Obama's presence, change did seem possible.

Roundtable participants agreed that Barack Obama had been effective in conveying a sincere wish to address mistrust between the United States and the Muslim world and to find common ground. Whether this truly marks a new beginning in U.S./Arab relations remains to be

seen but the President's remarks have opened an opportunity for dialogue. Commentators in the Middle East and in Europe are already citing "the Obama effect." For example, in his June 24 op-ed in *Le Figaro*, Sorbonne Iran expert Bernard Hourcade attributed Iranian electoral protests to a "double Obama effect." First, Obama's Cairo speech and his March 20 New Years greeting to the Iranian people shook the ideological foundation of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy which is based on hostility towards the United States. Then, as a result of eliminating the prospect of a direct U.S. threat, Obama enabled Iranian nationalists to distance themselves from the hard line Islamists and make common cause with Iranians seeking to embrace globalization.

### **Cairo Speech Themes:**

Roundtable participants agreed that, going forward, U.S. military and civilian leaders could usefully refer to the President's Cairo speech and reprise some of his themes in their own contacts with Muslim audiences. Ambassador Chas Freeman listed these as:

- The stereotypes about the United States are wrong.
- I (President Obama) am not an exception. Americans are not Islamophobes.
- We are respectful of Islam and the cultures of the Islamic world. Americans treat others with dignity.
- We stand for tolerance. We are an open country, not closed to Arabs and Muslims
- Our government is concerned about the Israel/Palestinian issue. We are well-intentioned but it will take time to produce results. You will see evidence of our efforts.
- We are sympathetic to those who advocate democracy but we know that democracy cannot be imposed.
- My administration intends to be consultative and collaborative. We will bear in mind the interests of the people of the region.
- Americans are not imperialists or colonialists. Our engagement in the Middle East is enduring but we seek no territory or permanent bases.

### **Al-Jazeera TV**

Neil MacFarquhar argued that the media platform which would offer Americans the widest audience in the Middle East is Al-Jazeera (The Peninsula), the satellite television founded by Qatari Crown Prince Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani. Al-Jazeera created a competitive news industry in a region where none had existed before and, in survey after survey, it ranks as the first place Arabs turn to for their news. The station has a C-SPAN like commitment to covering press conferences, speeches and hearings. According to MacFarquhar, Washington soured on Al-Jazeera after September 11 when the station's reporting reflected widespread Arab disapproval of U.S. Middle East policy. American officials rarely appear on Al-Jazeera. He recommends that the Obama administration re-think that decision. (On January 26, just

days after taking office, President Obama was interviewed on Al-Arabiya, a satellite television station owned by a member of the Saudi royal family.)

### **Other Public Diplomacy Points**

MacFarquhar is convinced that America's greatest export is hope and he urged that Americans let people in the Middle East know that they believe in other dreams and that they will support people trying to do the right thing. We should emphasize our commitment to human values -- shared values like justice which is emphasized in the Koran. The U.S. shouldn't push so hard for democratic elections. All of the current Arab regimes are essentially police states in MacFarquhar's view. The ground in the Middle East is not yet ready for democratic elections but it is ready for a widening of the public space/public debate. How to support civil society from a respectful distance is the challenge.

State's Dr. Nabeel Khoury agreed that the U.S. should not be in a position of pushing countries towards elections if they are not ready but he strongly advocated grass roots efforts to build democracy, civil society, media. He argued that the Bush administration democracy promotion via the the Middle East Partnership Initiative and Millennium Challenge Corporation was very helpful but unfortunately underfunded. These programs will continue in the Obama administration. Where secular and moderate political groups and civil society can flourish in the political space, Nabeel Khoury observed, it diminishes the space for extremism. The extremists are still there but their role is diminished.

As to communications advice for U.S. military leaders, Neil MacFarquhar recommended expressions of mutual respect and advancing mutual interests. He acknowledged that the American military will continue to encounter suspicion and dislike but correct behavior and efforts to establish individual relationships of trust will accomplish much. On an institutional level, providing Arab counterparts training and greater access to technology is appreciated. MacFarquhar has observed frustration among Arabs that their societies are currently so lagging in scientific and technological achievement.

The roundtable concluded with agreement that President Obama's Cairo speech had set a calmer, less confrontational tone and provided a useful opening. We, and audiences in the region, will be watching for further evidence of an "Obama effect."