

Dr. Aaron R. Lobel

Founder and President, America Abroad Media

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“Countering the Virtual Caliphate”

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Chairman Royce and Ranking Member Engel:

Thank you, Chairman Royce, Ranking member Engel, and distinguished members of the Committee for inviting me to testify today on a subject of such critical importance to the security of the United States, and indeed the world.

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to both of you for the model of bipartisanship you exemplify through your work on this Committee. Much of my own work takes place “beyond the water’s edge,” and there is no doubt in my mind that we will only succeed over the long term in addressing the ideological challenge posed by ISIS and other extremist groups if our policies are designed in a bipartisan manner and with bipartisan support.

Our country, especially in the aftermath of the horrific attack in Orlando, needs more positive examples of bipartisanship like this House Foreign Affairs Committee under Chairman Royce and Ranking Member Engel. Thank you for your leadership and thank you to all the members of this Committee.

The Ideological Challenge

Let’s make no mistake: to address the challenge we face today from Islamic extremism we need to design a strategy for the long term. It has been almost 15 years since 9/11 and 12 years since the 9/11 Commission issued its report. That report captured the essence of the challenge and was unfortunately prescient about the future:

“Our enemy is twofold: Al Qaeda, a stateless network of terrorists that struck us on 9/11; and a radical ideological movement in the Islamic world, inspired in part by Al Qaeda, which has spawned terrorist groups and violence across the globe... the first enemy is weakened, but continues to pose a grave threat. The second enemy is gathering, and will menace Americans and American interests long after Osama Bin Laden and his cohorts are killed or captured. Thus our strategy must match our means to two ends: dismantling the Al Qaeda network, and prevailing in the longer term over the ideology that gives rise to Islamist terrorism.”¹

In my testimony today, I’d like to draw on my experience as founder of the non-profit organization, America Abroad Media (AAM), which for the last decade and a half has developed relationships and partnered with the leading media channels in the greater Middle East.

Based on that experience, there are two principal points I would like to underscore. To counter and defeat the ideology behind Islamic extremism, the focus of the United States’ strategy should be on enabling, supporting and amplifying the best local partners and indigenous voices in the greater Middle

¹ Kean, Thomas H., and Lee H. Hamilton. *The 9/11 Commission Report*. Rep. N.p.: United States Government, 2004.

East. This approach will yield far better results than trying to manage an information or counter-messaging campaign from Washington.

Second, the U.S. government should make it a top priority to mobilize, catalyze and unleash the creative power of all of America's leading institutions that have tremendous capacity to engage positively with the world -- Hollywood, Silicon Valley, private philanthropy, NGOs and our universities. These institutions can and must play a central role working together with their counterparts in the Middle East who share a vision for positive change. The U.S. government can take the lead in propelling and stimulating these public-private partnerships, providing venture capital funding for those projects that have the potential to become commercially sustainable.

I will return to this issue shortly, with specific reference to how we can unleash the creativity of Hollywood to help transform the Arab drama and entertainment industry.

Our Experience in the Cold War

In many ways, the challenge we face today is not as new as some might think. Ideas have always mattered, and the media has always played an especially critical role in helping shape ideas. Indeed, Napoleon famously stated that "In war, four hostile newspapers are more to be feared than a thousand bayonets."²

In the Cold War, the United States grasped the significance of ideology and designed a strategy to address the ideological challenge posed by Communism. In April 1950, as several million Soviet and NATO troops faced off in the heart of Europe, President Harry Truman delivered an historic speech that outlined America's strategy for a battle of ideas.

Addressing the American Society of Newspaper Editors, President Truman emphasized that the emerging Cold War was not primarily a military or geopolitical conflict. It was, he said, "above all, a struggle for the minds of men."³ President Truman certainly appreciated the importance of military power. But to defeat the Soviets, he argued, the United States and its European allies should recognize that "fighting Communist propaganda [is]...as important as armed power or economic aid."⁴

There were many instances when the United States helped amplify liberal voices in Western Europe or behind the Iron Curtain. When Italy's democracy was under threat from Communists in 1948, for example, the U.S. government undertook a range of activities to support democratic forces. But so did Italian-American groups, who organized a massive letter writing campaign to their families and friends in Italy. And, so did Hollywood, flooding the country with feature and

² Kaplan, Tema. *Democracy: A World History*. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2015. Google Books. Oxford University Press. Web. 22 June 2016.

³ Truman Library - Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman." *Truman Library - Public Papers of the Presidents: Harry S. Truman*." Truman Library, n.d. Web. 22 June 2016

⁴ *Ibid.*

documentary films that supported the values of freedom. It was a success because so many different facets of American society got involved.

Similarly, in 1947, the Advertising Council -- which was formed by leading companies from the advertising industry -- created a steering committee to advise the State Department on how to communicate a vision of inspiration and hope behind the Marshall Plan, America's massive effort to help Europe's economic recovery. In numerous European languages, the Advertising Council's public service announcements instilled values and relayed messages to foster a cultural climate favorable towards the Marshall Plan and opposed to Communism. Here, the U.S. government saw the value of harnessing the tremendous talent of America's private sector to serve the interests of postwar peace and stability.

There are many other examples that could be cited here. But, what is striking about this history is how many of the projects that were launched during the Cold War involved America's private sector and America's civil society.

Countering Islamist Ideology Today

Looking back at the 15 years since 9/11, can we honestly say that our government has devoted the same amount of attention, energy and resources to "the struggle for the minds of men" -- to use President Truman's terminology -- as it has to "armed power"? This imbalance in resources, ironically, has been well understood and commented on by many of our finest military leaders, from former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, to former NATO Supreme Commander Admiral James Stavridis, to former Deputy Commander of CENTCOM, General John Allen, who was also Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. As Secretary Gates put it in 2008, "Non-military efforts -- these tools of persuasion and inspiration -- were indispensable to the outcome of the defining ideological struggle of the 20th century. They are just as indispensable in the 21st century -- and perhaps even more so."⁵

Perhaps one reason why we've been unable to respond as effectively to the ideological challenge we face today is because in many ways it is more complicated than the threat posed by Communism, which was at its heart a Western ideology rooted in the philosophy of a German, Karl Marx.

By contrast, our country has struggled to understand the ideology that fuels extremism in the Muslim World and how deeply this extremism is connected to the religion of Islam, to the politics of Islamism, to Sunni and Shia sectarianism or to the broader societal ills affecting that part of the world.

In reality, all these factors combine to create a combustible mix.

In the words of Egyptian intellectual Mamoun Fandy:

⁵ Gates, Robert M. "Remarks by Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, September 18, 1967." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* 23.10 (1967): 26-31. US Global Leadership Campaign. US Global Leadership Campaign. Web. 22 June 2016.

“True Islam has nothing to do with terror, but there is a visible link between terror and the culture prevailing among Muslims today, especially among the youth – and nobody disputes this. The first step towards resolving the crisis of violence and extremism is to recognize that we have a problem... It is not enough to condemn [violence] and feel sad for a little while. What the Muslims need is to 'upgrade their software,' which is programmed mainly by our schools, television and mosques... There is no choice but to dismantle this system and rebuild it in a way that is compatible with human culture and values.”⁶

Without understanding the nature of this ideology, its roots, the source of its attraction and the methods by which it is propagated, we cannot begin to counter it.

The Need to Support and Amplify Indigenous Voices

However, to be clear, countering this ideology is first and foremost a task that must be undertaken by the people of the greater Middle East. As one U.S. official said recently, “It’s not the U.S. government that’s going to break the [ISIS] brand. It’s going to be third parties.”⁷

Since 9/11, the US government does not appear to have made it a priority to identify and help support those indigenous voices in the Middle East who believe in the values of pluralism and civil discourse and who are trying to counteract extremist narratives. This may stem in part from the belief that very few such voices exist in the region, or that they lack any influence.

If this is the belief, it is profoundly mistaken. It is important to understand that there are many voices that oppose extremism -- both the violent or nonviolent varieties -- and who support positive change in the Arab and Muslim World. From my own experience working in the region, I can tell you that these partners exist in greater numbers than many in Washington may be aware of, and their work will have greater credibility and impact than anything the U.S. government can do.

Indeed, my colleague Joseph Braude, one of the most thoughtful experts on the Middle East, has pointed out that the public discontent expressed in the failed Arab Spring has led some regimes in the Middle East, particularly in the Gulf, to allow more space for what he calls “liberal incrementalists” to develop and express their ideas:

“Contrary to popular belief, the situation in some Arab autocracies is beginning to turn in Arab liberals’ favor: Following the disappointments of the Arab spring, continuing domestic disaffection has been joined by threats from jihadist enclaves and Iran-backed militias in

⁶ Friedman, Thomas L. "We Need Another Giant Protest." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 13 Jan. 2015. Web. 22 June 2016.

⁷ Miller, Greg. "Panel Casts Doubt on U.S. Propaganda Efforts against ISIS." *Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 2 Dec. 2015. Web. 22 June 2016.

neighboring states that have collapsed. Confronted with these threats, Arab leaderships are looking for ways to boost their populations' commitment to the survival of the state — by promoting reforms that remedy the causes of discontent. They understand that doing so successfully means enabling civil society, reforming the economy, legitimizing pluralism, and instilling equal treatment under the law. Within this framework, indigenous Arab liberals who champion such principles on the basis of incremental rather than revolutionary change have achieved a space in which to pursue their agenda.”⁸

The Potential in Middle East Media

One sector where there is real potential for positive change and positive impact in the Middle East is the media. Several of the most popular channels, reaching tens of millions of people, are now managed by liberal voices, who wish to communicate values of pluralism and civil discourse and counter extremist narratives. These channels have the highest credibility with their audiences. No U.S. government channel or program in the Middle East, no matter how well-intentioned or produced, can deliver this level of reach or impact.

The executives who lead these media institutions are designing or commissioning programs that can help catalyze change. For example:

One of AAM's partners in the region and the largest Pan-Arab channel, the Saudi owned Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC), is currently developing a large-scale anti-ISIS drama series. One of the lead producers of the show, a Saudi, was an extremist in his youth. The drama is based on real stories of young men and women from different parts of the Arab World who left their homes and previous lives to join ISIS. The series examines their motivations and expectations, and it follows a journey in which they discover that behind the propaganda and façade of ISIS lays a dystopian reality. Once they realize that they are being exploited as a tool to enable ISIS's expansionism, they begin to examine how they can break free and serve as champions of the struggle to roll it back.

Second, last year MBC aired the hit anti-ISIS comedy, *Selfie*. It was the number one Ramadan show in the Gulf, with an audience viewership exceeding 25 million. The show's lead actor, comedian Nasser Al Qassabi, previously starred in *Tash Matash*, a Saudi satire show that ran for nearly a decade and has been credited with helping to weaken the extremist strand in Saudi society over time. Qassabi has a long-term vision to build on the successes of *Tash Matash* through *Selfie* and other programs now in the works. He will be coming to Washington this fall to be honored by AAM at our annual Awards Dinner.

Third, one of our media partners in Abu Dhabi, Image Nation, has developed the first-ever 'Law and Order'-style television series, called *Justice* (in English), which is currently in post-production. To develop and write the series, Image

⁸ From Joseph Braude's forthcoming book, *Air Cover: Strategic Support for Change Through Arabic Media*.

Nation teamed up with award-winning producer Walter Parkes and the Emmy Award-winning writer of Law and Order Bill Finkelstein. According to Image Nation, “the series follows the ups and downs of a passionate young Emirati lawyer and her father, one of the region’s top attorneys, as they deal with challenging legal cases while navigating personal and family dramas.”⁹ In cooperation with the UAE Department of Justice, the program portrays real-life legal cases and will spark a public discussion of the role of society in strengthening good governance.

Hollywood Partnerships in Arab Drama and Entertainment

The examples above are reflective of the growing demand among audiences in the Middle East, especially young people, for original Arabic drama and entertainment programming. While tens of millions of Arabs watch Western entertainment programs, Bollywood films and Turkish soap operas, more than ever before these audiences want their own entertainment programs -- shows that originate in Arabic, emanate from the Middle East, and reflect their own cultural storylines and themes.

They want to build a new Golden Age of Arabic drama and entertainment. They want, as every part of the world wants, to develop shows they can export successfully to the rest of the world.

And in their pursuit, leading Arab media executives and their counterparts in the creative community in the Middle East are asking for America’s help. They are asking us for training in the storytelling and scriptwriting skills that make American shows so successful. They want Hollywood’s help to develop shows with better pacing, better story arcs and with more inherent tension and drama. And they want to know how Hollywood, historically, helped galvanize Americans and their allies to meet some of the world’s great challenges.

This means the United States has a tremendous opportunity to unleash the talent, creativity and ingenuity of Hollywood to help the Middle East develop a successful entertainment industry that tells stories of hope and aspiration and advances the values we share. Nobody is better at emotional, narrative-driven story telling than Hollywood. And where Arab entertainers aspire to be thought leaders and proponents of progress in their societies, Americans can and must stand with them and support them.

There is enormous potential for the U.S. to work with the creative community in the Middle East to jointly convene workshops bringing together Arab and Hollywood writers, producers and directors to support the next generation of storytellers in the Middle East. And this can be complemented by an array of new co-productions and collaborations in which the creative community in Hollywood can work with local content creators to help produce original large-scale drama and entertainment programming in Arabic.

⁹ "Filming Wraps for Image Nation Abu Dhabi's Landmark Legal Drama." *Image Nation Abu Dhabi*. Image Nation Abu Dhabi, Mar. 2016. Web. 22 June 2016.

AAM has already begun partnering with leading media institutions in the UAE and other parts of the Middle East, along with top tier Hollywood producers and writers, to develop these workshops and design new co-productions. We recently returned from a trip to Abu Dhabi with three of Hollywood's finest -- Ben Silverman, Greg Daniels and Howard Owens. Ben Silverman is the Emmy, Golden Globe, and Peabody Award-winning executive producer of *The Office*, *Ugly Betty*, *The Tudors*, *Jane the Virgin*, and *Marco Polo*; Greg Daniels is a leading comedy writer, producer, and director on shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and *The Simpsons* and co-creator of *The Office*, *King of the Hill*, and *Parks and Recreation*; and Howard Owens, Founder and co-CEO of Propagate Content and the former CEO of National Geographic Channels. Daniels led a workshop with 15 local writers, including from MBC, and Silverman and Owens met with more than 100 of their counterparts in the Arab creative community.

Ben Silverman, Howard Owens and Greg Daniels are three of America's best storytellers, and they have a track record of creating television formats for different local markets, then adapting and exporting them to the world. They are globally-minded and attuned to the needs of different cultures. In short, they are exactly the kind of top-tier Hollywood talent who can make a difference.

The Need for Public-Private Partnership and the Role of the USG

Empowering the media and creative community in the Middle East will be the most effective way to counter extremism, because they will always understand the nuances and needs of their market better than we can in Washington. And in the Middle East especially, counter-messaging with a U.S. government stamp on it will never have the same credibility as something authentically produced by a local director, writer or filmmaker in the Arab world.

There are already media companies and content creators in the Arab and Muslim Worlds ready to take on this challenge and to produce programming that can inject the ideas of pluralism, tolerance and the rule of law into societies too long dominated by extremist voices. And some of our best Hollywood talent -- like Ben Silverman -- is already engaged in trying to teach their Middle Eastern counterparts the art of telling moving stories and producing world class content.

But what this recipe is still missing in order to be successful is funding. The drama and entertainment market as it currently exists in the Middle East is not commercially sustainable. The advertising revenues are not high enough to offset the risk for multinationals to invest in the region. And without the capital to make the sort of high production value, multi-platform content that today's sophisticated Middle Eastern media consumers expect, and that would compete directly with extremist narratives, the efforts of the region's best and brightest media companies and their Hollywood partners will not bear fruit. Overcoming this challenge is a role uniquely suited to the U.S. government.

Already, the State Department has taken some very promising initial steps to advance efforts of this kind by leveraging its convening power to serve as a powerful dynamic force. Last month, under the leadership of Under Secretary Rick Stengel and Assistant Secretary Evan Ryan, the State Department

convened a meeting of high-level Hollywood talent, including our partners Ben Silverman and Greg Daniels, to discuss these very issues. We look forward to further discussions with the State Department about how we can synergize with and complement each other's efforts, as this could become a great example of a public-private partnership.

Catalytic funding from the U.S. government would make a tremendous difference going forward. In light of the national security stakes, this is a case where -- to borrow from the commercial sector -- the government can play a vitally important venture capital role. It can provide the seed funding that will enable the best creative content to succeed and become commercially sustainable. Then government funds will no longer be needed.

But the government should not be alone in this venture. Its involvement will also help stimulate America's philanthropic sector, including foundations and patriotic Americans with the resources to make a difference.

The John Templeton Foundation, for example, has an Islam Initiative that supports and works with leading theologians, religious institutions and media figures around the Muslim World. The Foundation has a demonstrated interest in the relationship between science, modernity and all the major religions, and its Board of Trustees involves leading Muslim scholars and scientists from the Middle East. The Templeton Foundation has high stature around the world, including in the Middle East. In other words, there is little 'blowback,' and often a gain in credibility, for an institution or media host in the Middle East to receive funding from the Templeton Foundation.

I believe that several of our great philanthropic institutions, including Carnegie Corporation, the MacArthur Foundation and others, could have a similar impact, especially if these foundations banded together. Here is another area where sustained involvement and encouragement from the highest levels of our government could make a real difference.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of the Orlando attack, this country sorely needs renewed bipartisan energy behind our public diplomacy. The emphasis must be on new ideas stemming from bipartisan cooperation and which address the grave threat facing us and the entire world.

I believe the United States of America has a vital national security interest in helping to build a successful creative industry in the Middle East that will shape the culture of the region for decades to come. That industry will be driven, as it should be, by the finest writers, directors, producers, actors and filmmakers in the region, with the vital support of and partnership from our finest creative minds in Hollywood.

The concept I am advocating is not mine, and it is not new. In 2002, the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, named the "Djerijean Commission" for its Chairman former Ambassador Edward Djerijean, called for:

“...the aggressive development of programming in partnership with private firms, nonprofit institutions and government agencies – both in the United States and the Arab and Muslim nations. This programming can then be distributed through existing channels in the region.”¹⁰

The Commission had it right 14 years ago, and it is critical that we begin this effort in earnest now. With the leadership of our government, combined with the creativity and dynamism of Hollywood and the generous spirit of our philanthropic sector, we can draw on the best of our country to help the Middle East and the world defeat this threat. America has risen to the challenge posed by dangerous ideologies before, and we can certainly do so again.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify before your Committee today.

¹⁰ Djerejian, Edward. "Changing Minds Winning Peace." *Changing Minds Winning Peace* (n.d.): n. pag. *US Department of State*. US Department of State. Web. 22 June 2016.