

Remarks for Her Majesty Queen Noor
Media as Global Diplomat II:
New Findings on the Science of Media and Conflict
US Institute of Peace; Washington, DC; 10/1/09

Thank you Ambassador Solomon, Sheldon Himelfarb, and the United States Institute of Peace for organizing this important event in partnership with the Alliance of Civilizations Media Fund – and thank you all for being here.

I especially want to thank our hosts for dedicating this second event in the *Media as Global Diplomat* series to a discussion of cutting edge research that is exploring how media influences identity formation and the dynamic of intergroup and intercultural relations.

Media is increasingly present in our lives and in the lives of our children. It is therefore vital that we understand the impact that we are having on one another when we tell stories, report news, or provide a megaphone for diverse opinions expressed through any number of proliferating media formats and platforms.

The broader question that we are tackling today is extremely important to me on both a personal and professional level: how do we – individually and collectively – navigate and reconcile our diverse identities?

My own life story begs me to consider this question on an almost daily basis. And I know that it must be on the minds of countless people around the world who are of mixed cultural and religious heritage. AoCMF is, in fact, the brainchild of the conversations, concerns and dreams of several such multi-cultural heirs -- its founders Arab and Muslim and Euro Americans.

This issue has been raised in starkest relief in recent years in the context of relations between Western and Muslim societies. And it is perhaps in that context that I have confronted it most directly.

I am an Arab-American by birth, granddaughter of Orthodox Christian Syrian immigrants to the Americas at the turn of the last century. I was raised in a Judeo-Christian society, educated in the West, and became a Muslim when I married in 1978.

For over 30 years I have endeavored to build bridges between these different worlds. I am just one of millions of people for whom Western and Islamic cultures are not mutually distinct entities destined for confrontation, but rather wholly consistent and constituent parts of who I am and what I believe.

When I married, reporters were constantly asking me how an educated, liberal American woman could go live in such a repressive culture. Those reporters did not know the Arab women I did – the doctors, lawyers, professors and entrepreneurs – many of whom became friends and trusted advisors as I set my priorities for public service.

And they certainly did not know my husband. King Hussein was that rarity among leaders. A Hashemite direct-descendant of the Prophet Mohammad (PBUH), he understood his temporal role and responsibilities through this spiritual lens, as that of public servant rather than absolute ruler.

He believed deeply and passionately in authentic Islamic values, such as tolerance and pluralism, social equity and gender equality, consensus building, and above all, in peace. He promoted social justice, political participation and economic progress in ways consistent with Islamic and Arab values. Most of all, he understood that one could be a citizen of the world, and remain a devoted member of one's own country, culture, and faith.

And yet this understanding and harmony remains elusive at the societal level.

In our increasingly media-saturated world, it is perhaps unsurprising that some of the events that most challenge our capacities for tolerance and understanding are not only the troubling events covered by the media, but also the almost manufactured crises that are generated by some media outlets – be they cartoons printed in a Danish newspaper, a DVD circulated in American newspapers prior to last year's Presidential election or giving a platform to extremist, almost violent voices on talk shows.

Polls show that the media is at the core of perceptions and misperceptions that contribute to tension between Western and predominantly Muslim societies. In a 2006 Gallup poll, Middle Eastern respondents were asked: "What can the West do to promote better relations?" An overwhelming 47 percent of respondents said, "Stop disrespecting our religion" and "Stop portraying us like we are inferior."

Negative stereotypes have the power to humiliate, especially when continuously reinforced by popular culture. They can set the emotional and political stage for policies that reinforce misunderstanding, which can lead to conflict and even war.

In my conflict recovery and peace-building efforts around the world, I have seen media used to promote intolerance, hatred and violence, from here in the US to the battlefields of the Middle East, Northern Ireland, the Balkans, Africa and elsewhere.

As one example: in 2006, 11 years after the end of violent conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, while launching a United World College school in Mostar – I was stunned to discover that it is the **only** school in the country which integrates students and teachers from all three ethnic communities in the classroom – a tragic and dangerous reflection of an environment in which the media continues to pit ethnic and religious groups against each other, dangerously exacerbating tensions in the lead up to 2010 elections.

The students I spent time with there were excited and thrilled to be together, and were motivated and inspired by each other and the opportunity to develop and exemplify an alternative vision of their communities and country. They understood clearly that the status quo is not in the best interest of their families, their communities or their country.

The media has the power to support and reinforce this basic instinct to humanize those who are different. And it needs to become a part of the solution, rather than part of the problem.

By shedding light on the unfamiliar and by exposing realities of events as lived by the "other", both news and entertainment media can foster empathy, tolerance and reconciliation.

That is why the King Hussein Foundation, which I chair, introduced a Media and Humanity Program during the Tribeca Film Festival in 2007 to support access to films and media

projects that highlight shared values and aspirations across social, economic and political divides, with special emphasis on the Middle East and Muslim world.

It is also the reason why I helped to found the Alliance of Civilizations Media Fund – and why I am so pleased to be here today with our Executive Director Shamil Idriss, Professor Rebecca Saxe, who led the MIT portion of our research, and Jay Winsten from Harvard and Cynthia Schneider from Brookings, who have been so supportive in providing advice during the Fund’s foundational period.

I look forward to hearing the perspectives of the distinguished media professionals, policy-makers, researchers, and advocates who are with us today. As today’s discussion gets underway, I would like to offer, with all humility, a few observations and suggestions - drawn from my own experiences.

First, let us not OVER-estimate the role that the media plays in polarizing our societies. After all, the problems that divide us are not simply ones of perception. There are real political conflicts that require real political solutions. I know from the tireless efforts of my late husband that in trying to build peace, nothing substitutes for political will and courage. So as we explore the impact that media’s projection of violence, despair, and conflict have on relations across cultures, let us always keep in mind that it is the persistent presence of these conditions, and not merely the broadcasting of them, that is at the core of what plagues us.

At the same time, let us not UNDER-estimate the role that the media could play in reconciling and stabilizing our societies. After all, in the absence of direct contact with cultures, beliefs, and worldviews different from our own, it is the media’s portrayal of them that most directly shapes whether we see cultural diversity as a blessing to be embraced or a threat to be confronted.

News broadcasters often say that they are only showing the world as it is, and commercial media producers often say they are only giving their audience what they want to see. But those who report the news are public servants in the most obvious sense. We rely on them to tell us what we need to know about the world – not the other way around. They have a special responsibility to the public, which certainly deserves our consideration, analysis, and discussion.

Finally, I would like to note a simple paradox. So much discussion of the media centers around what is broadcast, how it is disseminated, and whether it reaches the most critical or at-risk audiences.

But in all my years of working around the world, I have found that listening is usually more important than talking. Oftentimes, it’s less about what you say and how you say it, than genuinely hearing what others are trying to communicate.

And so I ask out of genuine curiosity and concern: is there a place for the media industry and the public diplomacy policy-making community to help us listen to the stories of others, or are we only concerned with making sure they hear our stories?

I look forward to hearing what the speakers on your first panel have to say regarding the results of some of the latest research that is exploring how media influences our thinking about ourselves and about others.

At the same time, we have to acknowledge that we may all come to a better understanding of media's impact on our attitudes and behaviors without changing a single thing about what media outlets actually produce and disseminate.

Because without understanding the commercial and - in some cases - political pressures that confront media producers and broadcasters – not to mention the new challenges brought by the advent and rapid proliferation of new media technologies and platforms - it will be hard for us to know whether the implications of the research that is being reported upon here will have any resonance with those who determine what gets produced and broadcast.

So I will be equally interested to hear from the second panel of media producers and professionals – some of whom are trying to apply their trade to fostering greater cross-cultural understanding and respect – what implications they think that these research findings might have for the work that they do and for their peers in the film, television, and new media industries.

With those few thoughts, I want to reiterate my sincere gratitude to our hosts for providing this opportunity/lovely space and for giving priority to this conversation. I look forward to today's discussion and I thank all of you for being here and taking part in it.