

## PUBLIC DIPLOMACY 2.0: THE UNITED STATES VIRTUAL EMBASSY IN IRAN

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**Rezumat:** Acest articol analizează activitatea ambasadei virtuale a Statelor Unite în Iran, atât din perspectiva contextului strategic, cât și a mesajelor cheie transmise. Metodele de cercetare utilizate au îmbinat analiza istorică și pe cea retorică. Întrucât diplomația digitală reprezintă un domeniu mai nou chiar și față de diplomația publică, majoritatea surselor folosite în cercetare sunt recente și pot fi accesate pe internet, principalul canal al diplomației digitale (sau diplomației publice 2.0). Am încercat totodată să evaluez eficiența ambasadei virtuale, prin conectarea mesajelor transmise de Departamentul de Stat, de contextul strategic și prioritățile de politică externă în regiune, dar și de sondajele de opinie.

**Abstract:** This article analyzes the activity of the virtual embassy of the United States in Iran, from the standpoint of the strategic context and also based on the key messages. The research methods employed both historical analysis, as well as rhetoric analysis. Since digital diplomacy is a newer field than public diplomacy, most of the sources used in this research are very recent and are available on the Internet, as this is the main *locus* for digital diplomacy, or public diplomacy 2.0. I have also tried to assess the efficiency of the American virtual embassy in Iran, by connecting the messages conveyed by the Department of State with the strategic context and foreign policy priorities in the region, as well as with public opinion polls.

**Keywords:** digital diplomacy, public diplomacy, virtual embassy, United States, Iran

### 1. Public diplomacy and digital diplomacy

Diplomacy has long been the privilege of well established elites. Even in the twentieth century, despite Woodrow Wilson's open diplomacy plea, diplomatic activity was conducted by a closed in-group of specialists. It was the Cold War and the communication revolution that have determined a paradigm shift in bilateral affairs: firstly, what was designed exclusively for the foreign policy field has extended to other fields as well (most importantly the war of ideas); secondly, the inter-governmental model of communication grew old-dated, due to open and free access to information. Academia put forward the term of public diplomacy to reflect this change; in practice, though, diplomatic staff implemented the change languidly.

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Edmund Gullion pioneered the field of public diplomacy in 1965. He defined it as follows: “Public diplomacy deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private groups and interests in one country with those of another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as between diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the processes of inter-cultural communications.”<sup>1</sup> Public diplomacy theory has evolved since 1965, even if in a heterogeneous manner. Kirstin M. Lord decried academia’s relatively low involvement in the study of public diplomacy, which renders it to be a niche theory today<sup>2</sup>. Historian Nicholas J. Cull offered one of the most comprehensive definitions of public diplomacy: it is that activity which is conducted primarily by public institutions with the purpose of communicating with foreign publics. Moreover, Cull divides public diplomacy into five operations: listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, mutual exchanges and international broadcasting<sup>3</sup>. These five different tasks have long stood as independent activities in the foreign ministries, but if I designed as public diplomacy they differ from propaganda. In the first place, unlike propaganda - which focuses on transmitting information, public diplomacy focuses on engagement. Although one might argue that their objective is the same, to influence, and that both need credibility to be successful, the specific methods are divergent. R.S. Zaharna adds on to this debate the fact that propaganda is in essence opaque and controlling, whereas public diplomacy is transparent and the audience chooses which message to trust or not<sup>4</sup>. Jan Melissen also distinguishes between the two concepts, stating that public diplomacy involves a bidirectional dialogue, when in fact propaganda rests on a unidirectional monologue<sup>5</sup>. Other scholars have simply defined public diplomacy as being daily and strategic communications with the sole purpose of influencing foreign publics<sup>6</sup>. Moving on to the practitioners’ understanding of public diplomacy, they extended the theory

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<sup>1</sup> [http://pdaa.publicdiplomacy.org/?page\\_id=6](http://pdaa.publicdiplomacy.org/?page_id=6)

<sup>2</sup> Kristin M. Lord, *What academics (should have to say) about public diplomacy*, Paper presented at the APSA Political Communication Conference on International Communication and Conflict, 31 August 2005, <http://ics-www.leeds.ac.uk/papers/vp01.cfm?outfit=pmt&folder=7&paper=2469>

<sup>3</sup> Nicholas J. Cull, *Public Diplomacy: Taxonomies and Histories*, “The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science”, ed. Sage, New York, 13 February 2008, p. 35-36

<sup>4</sup> R. S. Zaharna, *Battle to bridges. US strategic communication and public diplomacy after 9/11*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2010, p. 78.

<sup>5</sup> Jan Melissen, *The new public diplomacy: between theory and practice*, Palgrave MacMillan, New York, 2005 p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph S. Nye Jr., *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power*, in “The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science”, Sage, New York, 13 februarie 2008, pp. 96-110.

to encompass activities performed both by governments and non-governmental actors or even sole individuals<sup>7</sup>. In their view, public diplomacy is also characterized by transparency and a bigger capability to disseminate information<sup>8</sup>.

More recent definitions of public diplomacy still focus on the informational and relational frameworks, but are a bit more articulate. For Bruce Gregory, public diplomacy “describes ways and means by which states, associations of states, and nonstate actors understand cultures, attitudes, and behavior; build and manage relationships; and influence opinions and actions to advance their interests and values”<sup>9</sup>. For Greg Simons, public diplomacy is both a “means of promoting a country’s soft power”, a form of communication which is “not only about informing foreign publics, but also influencing them in a manner that benefits the foreign policy and interests of that country”, and it “is creating interaction and relationships”<sup>10</sup>.

As a relatively new field, public diplomacy has been in constant evolution. The technological revolution and the transition to the information society compelled new developments. Above all, what was considered “granted audience” had diminished due the multiplication of the communication channels<sup>11</sup>. Secondly, new technologies have determined public offices to adopt a bidirectional type of communication, the public now being able to influence the political agenda<sup>12</sup>. Majority of the recent changes have reflected on the strategic context of the communication, messaging, relation between sender and receiver, and also on the channels employed. Until 1990, radio and TV were the preferred channels. Internet was a breakthrough in communications: the new medium presented itself with the advantage of speed, of engagement with a larger target audience in real time and of a platform in which various formats of information can be supported.

Starting with the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the virtual medium took off. Even the Taliban “have produced Web sites, electronic magazines, DVDs with combat scenes, and even downloadable Taliban ringtones”<sup>13</sup>. More recently, an online platform has

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<sup>7</sup> Charles Wolf Jr., Brian Rosen, *Public Diplomacy: how to think about and improve it*, Rand Corporation 2004, Santa Monica, Canada.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Bruce Gregory, *Public Diplomacy: Sunrise of an Academic Field*, p. 3, [https://smpa.gwu.edu/sites/smpa.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Gregory\\_Annals311723.pdf](https://smpa.gwu.edu/sites/smpa.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Gregory_Annals311723.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Greg Simons, “Perception of Russia’s soft power and influence in the Baltic States”, *Public Relations Review*, 2014, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.10.019>, p. 2-3.

<sup>11</sup> Kennon H. Nakamura, Matthew C. Weed, „US Public Diplomacy and current Issues”, *Congressional Research Service*, p. 15, 7-5700, R40989, 18 decembrie 2004, p.34.

<sup>12</sup> Ed. Jolyon Welsh, Daniel Fearn, *Engagement. Public Diplomacy in a Globalised World*, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Londra, 2008, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Seib, *Public Diplomacy, New Media, and Counterterrorism*, Center on Public Diplomacy, Council on Foreign Relations apud Tom Coghlan, “Taliban Spin Doctors Winning Fresh Ground

translated and published infographics that were produced by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and which were meant to showcase the ascending trend of the terrorist organization through their rising militants' power base, as well as through their actions. Hence, in this context of digitization and multiplication of actors with international influence, foreign ministries were forced to rethink their activities by taking into consideration new technologies. For some years now, a preoccupation for e-diplomacy or cyberdiplomacy has emerged, mainly in the informal non-academic channels. Fergus Hanson, researcher at the Brookings Institute, highlighted the fact there is no consensus in the diplomatic world in regard to the naming of the activity of using the internet in diplomacy. For example, the American State Department's „21st century diplomacy” encompasses both internet and diplomacy, while the British Foreign & Commonwealth Office prefers the term „digital diplomacy” and the Canadian Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development adopts a more vague approach through the „open diplomacy” concept. For Hanson, e-diplomacy is defined as „the use of the internet and new Information Communications Technologies to help carry out diplomatic objectives”<sup>14</sup>.

## 2. United States Public Diplomacy Framework and Innovations

State's Department first attempts at the public diplomacy reform were purely administrative. Until 1998, public diplomacy was conducted by the U.S Information Agency (USIA), which was created at the height of the Cold War in 1953. Consequently, after the end of the Cold War, in the 90's end of history euphoria, some voices were protesting against the preservation of the Cold War pattern of operating public diplomacy<sup>15</sup>. Nancy Snow argues that the main functions of USIA after the dissolution of the Soviet Union were the spread of democracy and free markets enhancing national security<sup>16</sup>. It was not until 1998 that the USIA's functions were transferred to State and an Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs (R) was created. This centralization was meant to have the advantage of synchronizing public diplomacy with the more traditional line of diplomacy, thus ensuring rapid response capabilities<sup>17</sup> (until the reform, USIA had to run all decision by the State Department). The mission of the Under Secretary is to “support the achievement of U.S. foreign policy goals and

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in Propaganda War with NATO,” Times (London), November 12, 2009, <http://www.cfr.org/united-states/center-public-diplomacy-public-diplomacy-new-media-counterterrorism/p24906>

<sup>14</sup> Fergus Hanson, *Baked in and Wired: eDiplomacy @ State*, Brookings Institute, 25 octombrie 2012, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/reports/2012/10/25-ediplomacy-hanson>

<sup>15</sup> Liam Kennedy and Scott Lucas, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup> Nancy Snow, “Hard sell: how the USIA went from Cold War propagandist to corporate pitchman”, *Toward Freedom*, vol. 47, no. 3, June- July 1998.

<sup>17</sup> Kennon H. Nakamura, Matthew C. Weed, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

objectives, advance national interests, and enhance national security by informing and influencing foreign publics and by expanding and strengthening the relationship between the people and Government of the United States and citizens of the rest of the world”<sup>18</sup>. This definition demonstrates that public diplomacy represents more than a foreign policy tool, whose purpose is to impact the global public opinion: it is an important element of national security. What is more, the website of the under secretary counts as one of its activities “efforts to confront ideological support for terrorism”<sup>19</sup>. Since 2007, the Under Secretary started to benefit from a strategic framework that outlined the following priorities: creating a positive image of the U.S. in the world, isolating extremists and violent groups and promoting interests and common values between Americans and the rest of the world<sup>20</sup>.

The organization and budgets of the Under Secretary are speaking for the functions, instruments and the relevance credited to public diplomacy. Main activities are being run in the area of education and cultural affairs, public affairs, international information – which have their own bureaus, and more recently, strategic counterterrorism information – which is only a center. Nowadays, the Under Secretary also has an Office of Policy, Planning and Resources. Regarding budgetary matters, for the fiscal year 2012, the Under Secretary had received 537 million dollars, with additional 319 million dollars for cultural and education exchanges (distinct funding)<sup>21</sup>. In 2008, the funding did not exceed 1 million dollars. This enormous boost in funding is solid proof of the concern and trust of the Obama administration in public campaigns, but it is also reveals the fact that the real reform happened in the aftermath of 9/11 and focused chiefly on public diplomacy efforts toward the Islamic World.

Barack Obama has endorsed creative public diplomacy at the beginning of his term, on the 4th of June 2009 in Cairo, where he launched “a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world”. This new beginning was about “a sustained effort to listen to each other; to learn from each other; to respect one another; and to seek common ground”<sup>22</sup>, all in all, the basis of successful public diplomacy. Withal, American public diplomacy still seemed to struggle between the new paradigm and the traditional Cold War rhetoric, especially when it came to the main target audience, the Muslim world. Innovation occurred mainly in the field of internet, virtual public diplomacy (or

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.state.gov/r/>

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> Kennon H. Nakamura, Matthe C. Weed, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>21</sup> FY 2012 State and US Aid-Core Budget, Fact Sheet, Bureau of Resource Management, 14 February 2012, <http://www.state.gov/s/d/rm/rls/fs/2011/156553.htm>

<sup>22</sup> \*\*\*, *Remarks by the President on A New Beginning*, Cairo University, Cairo, 4 June 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-cairo-university-6-04-09>

public diplomacy 2.0<sup>23</sup>) being handled by the Bureau of International Information Programs. Digital activities were organized depending on geographic regions and subject areas (democracy human rights, foreign policy, values). The website of the State Department was shortly redesigned with a more interactive format, which displays social media channels and also grants users access to *My State Department* – an application that allows the customization of the layout. The administration's understanding of a new beginning was also mirrored by the creation of the Digital Outreach Team: 10 civilians were posting information targeting the Muslim world on Arabic, Persian and Urdu websites (main themes were Palestine, multiculturalism, American foreign policy in the Middle East, retreating from Iraq, war on terror)<sup>24</sup>. State Department also circulated two electronic pamphlets: *The Terrorist Network* was translated in 36 languages and it leaned over 9/11 and al Qaeda, and *Voices of Freedom* was written from the Iraqi elites' point of view on the brutality of Saddam's regime. The creation of the *Open Dialogue* interactive forum, which allows American citizens to connect to their Muslim peers and communicate, is also another sample of the adoption of new medium. The forum supports more languages<sup>25</sup>.

Digital diplomacy was not engaged only in relation to the Muslim world, but also to the Chinese and Russian publics: online consulates, various blogs dedicated to current aspects of bilateral affairs, public campaigns over the internet are only a couple of digital activities that permit engaging with relatively distant publics. Moreover, in China, "online and offline interaction expands from the capital to the West and from the elites to the masses"<sup>26</sup>, which is an encouraging consideration of American PD in this cultural space. The virtual consulate was launched in 2008 for Russian communities, and it constituted a more, direct, localized and personalized PD<sup>27</sup>. "American Corners, American Presence Posts, and Virtual Consulates together can form key building blocks of a **New Diplomacy that informs and influences foreign audiences in their homes, places of business, and venues of leisure**"<sup>28</sup>, reads out the report.

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<sup>23</sup> PD 2.0 refers to the social media.

<sup>24</sup> Lina Khatib, William Dutto, Michael Thalwall, "Public Diplomacy 2.0: An exploratory case study of the US Digital Outreach Team", *Center on Democracy, Development, and The Rule of Law Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies*, 6 ianuarie 2011, Stanford University, p. 8.

<sup>25</sup> United States General Accounting Office Report to the Committee on International Relations, House of Representatives *U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY State Department Expands Efforts but Faces Significant Challenges*, p. 16, septembrie 2003, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d03951.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> Xin Zhong, Jiayi Lu, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>27</sup> \*\*\*, *The New Diplomacy: Utilizing Innovative Communication Concepts that Recognize Resource Constraints A Report of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy July 2003*, p. 6, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/22956.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 1.

One of the most publicized campaigns, at least for Beers' term as Under Secretary for public diplomacy, was called *Shared Values* and it involved a set of short movies broadcasted on Muslim television channels. The message behind the campaign was that a universal set of values is shared both by the Americans and the Muslims, so there is actually no cultural divide. Shared Values turned out to be a complete mess, from strategy until implementation. First and foremost, many governments refused to broadcast the movies as they viewed them "as paid political ads of the U.S. government"<sup>29</sup>.

Traditional PD programs continue to be well funded (Fulbright, visa program, cultural exchanges and Speakers program). Nonetheless, we need to take into consideration the fact that Internet has the advantage of running programs at a lower cost<sup>30</sup>, offers customized interactions, flexible and in real time, with no regard to distance<sup>31</sup>. There are some questions regarding the leverage of internet in diplomacy which are left unanswered: to what extent can one use the traditional messages on the new channels and how is online communication efficient in those cultural spaces in which internet access is limited due the economic and social developments, or even more important, due to political reasons? The U.S. State Department was eager to find out by launching a virtual embassy in Iran.

### 3. Launching the United States Virtual Embassy to Iran

In spite of the tense relations during the Cold War with Russia and China, after 1990 the bilateral ties were slowly normalized. On the other hand, the Arab cultural space posed a new challenge to the American foreign policy. Firstly, old allies converted into anti-American champions, Iran being the perfect example. Secondly, war on terror generated the idea that the U.S. is actually fighting Islam, especially in Afghanistan. The lack of Middle Eastern public's trust in Americans was induced by the military interventions in the area, the American double-standard policy and the American support for Israel. For some, America's major trouble in the Muslim world is not the message, but a lack of credibility<sup>32</sup>.

67% Americans deemed Iran as a negative country in 2011<sup>33</sup>. A recent CNN poll revealed that in September 2015 about 49% Americans say that Iran represents a serious threat to the U.S.<sup>34</sup> The situations is similar on the other side.

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<sup>29</sup> Nancy Snow, "U.S. Public Diplomacy. Its History, Problems and Promise", *Readings in Propaganda and Persuasion*, [http://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upmbinaries/11850\\_Chapter12.pdf](http://uk.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upmbinaries/11850_Chapter12.pdf), p. 234

<sup>30</sup> Condoleeza Rice, *Transformational Diplomacy: Shaping US Diplomatic Posture in the 21st Century*, 16 ianuarie 2006, Stanford University, <http://www.cfr.org/us-strategy-and-politics/transformational-diplomacy-shaping-us-diplomatic-posture-21st-century/p9637>

<sup>31</sup> Liam Kennedy și Scott Lucas, *op. cit.*, p. 318.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibidem* p. 321.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/07/13/chapter-6-views-of-iran-2/>

<sup>34</sup> <http://i2.cdn.turner.com/cnn/2015/images/09/12/iranpoll.pdf>



In 2011, 63% Iranians had a negative image of the U.S.<sup>35</sup> The negative image trend was not broken in the Muslim world by the Arab spring. Even in Turkey, a NATO ally, surprisingly, 77% held unfavorable views of the U.S. 73% Pakistanis, 79% Egyptians, 80% Palestinian gave negative ratings to U.S. in a Pew poll<sup>36</sup>. U.S. unilateralism and war on terror were one of the main reasons of the negative correlations. It was in this climate that the idea of a virtual embassy to Iran emerged.

Announcing the *opening* of the virtual embassy to Iran proved to be a perfect public diplomacy exercise: Hillary Clinton, then secretary of state, offered an interview for BBC, which was also dubbed in Arabic. The format of the interview was creative: the questions had been carefully selected by the interviewer from 1500 commentaries and 1000 emails submitted by Iranians. They wanted to find out about the sanctions imposed due to the nuclear regime, the military presence in the Middle East and the support for Israel. Clinton's responses were part original, part in line with the Cold War rhetoric. She built her discourse on antithetical themes: friendship with the Iranian people *versus* tense bilateral affairs between the American and Iranian governments, undignified behavior or Iranian leaders *versus* the American policy model. Aside from the antithesis, another cold warrior specific figure of speech was the use of metaphors.

In regard with the most original ideas put forward in the interview, Clinton advocated the use of virtual communication channels. For example, when she was asked about US involvement in the Green Movement, madam secretary calmly replied that the U.S. merely asked for Twitter not to be closed<sup>37</sup>. Hillary Clinton also touched on Internet access, which is controlled and often censored in Iran, reaffirming the top priority represented by offering technologies and training to prevent censorship; she also stated that free access to the internet stands for freedom of expression. Human rights issues were another *leitmotiv*: without plainly accusing Ahmadinejad's regime, she mentioned the existence of a "group of people or individuals in control who seem not to care about their own people, who seem to reject human rights"<sup>38</sup>. Quite on the contrary, the U.S. is filled with good intentions and seeks a "better future inside Iran"<sup>39</sup>. It is hardly surprising that the virtual embassy will differentiate itself from the traditional layout of all American embassies websites through the fact that it contains an Open Societies section, dedicated to human rights and democracy.

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<sup>35</sup> Charles Wolf Jr. Brian Rosen, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.pewglobal.org/2011/07/13/chapter-2-views-of-the-u-s-and-american-foreign-policy/>

<sup>37</sup> Full interview can be watched here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ED0iU-sMaGA>

<sup>38</sup> <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/texttrans/2011/10/20111026181132su0.3778432.html#axzz3my1g9IBV>

<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*.



Toward the end of the interview, Hillary Clinton proudly announced the launch of the virtual embassy: “We’ll put it on the web because we get lots of questions that people don’t know where to get answers. How do I study in the United States? How do I travel to the United States? I’m trying to increase the number of visas for students so that we have more Iranian students coming to study here. We’re trying to reach out to the Iranian people, and we’ve tried to reach out to the government, just not very successfully.”<sup>40</sup>

Launching the virtual embassy to Iran should have been a sign of détente in bilateral affairs. However, the similarities between Clinton’s interview and Cold War rhetoric are striking: Iran’s nuclear program seemed very much like the nuclear buildup in Cuba in 1962, internet censorship became the new Berlin – a symbol of freedom. By using the “electronic curtain” metaphor and other warrior-like images, Clinton’s speech points out the strategic reason behind the virtual embassy: it is meant as a challenge to the Iranian government, which acts as the main control and censorship body. Obviously enough though, the virtual embassy does not aim for a regime change, but “to see the rulers of Iran change their outlook and their behavior”<sup>41</sup>. Another aspect worth noticing is that the American public diplomacy is trying to create a bond with the Iranian public: just like at the end of World War 2, the Allies blamed Hitler and not the German people, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, American diplomacy is scolding Iranian rulers, and not the citizens, with whom it intends to “create better relations”<sup>42</sup>.

The opening of the virtual diplomatic mission did not occur in a festive context. On the contrary, it was pushed live just a week after the British embassy was attacked and looted by protesters, who were demonstrating against the sanctions imposed by UK. The State Department, however, decided to go forward with the decision of launching its diplomatic mission, the risks of operating in the virtual space being minimal: hence, Hillary Clinton addressed the Iranians on a short message video on December 6, 2011 in which she explained the reasons for a virtual embassy. A fact sheet about this decision was also circulated by the State Department and it outlines the fact that the website aims at reaching and engaging with the Iranian people directly, offering information about the American society, culture and politics and also offering hardware and software to the Iranians in order to help them circumvent “their government’s systematic efforts to deny their voice”<sup>43</sup>.

With regard to the organization chart, it is a bit unclear on what the place of the virtual embassy is. Technically, the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs has an Office of Iranian Affairs, or the Iranian desk, which should be responsible for the

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>41</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>42</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>43</sup> State Department, *Virtual Embassy to Tehran: Information to Counter Iranian Isolation*, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/178686.pdf>

virtual embassy together the Office of Press and Public Diplomacy. The Bureau of International Information Programs is also involved, especially when it comes to providing content. Nowadays, the focus has changed and what used to be Deputy Assistant Secretary for Iraq and Iran also holds the role of Deputy Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL. According to Washington Times, the virtual embassy is being handled by one career diplomat and three contractors<sup>44</sup>. Even if it is understaffed in comparison to the formal diplomatic missions, it offers the benefit of a money-saving endeavor.

### Similarities between Hillary Clinton's speech and John F. Kennedy's

Secretary Clinton's Interview with BBC Persia, 26 October 2011	President Kennedy Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba, 22 octombrie 1962
„we see disturbing trends and actions having to do with the continuing covert effort to build a nuclear weapons program” <sup>45</sup>	„clandestine decision” <sup>46</sup>
„a nuclear weapons program with a lot of deception, a lot of lying to the International Atomic Energy Agency and the rest of the international community” <sup>47</sup>	„that statement was false” <sup>48</sup>
„electronic curtain”- „the 21st century equivalent of the barbed wire and the fences and the dogs that the old Soviet Union used” <sup>49</sup>	„imprisoned island”, „captive people of Cuba” <sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jun/3/virtual-us-embassy-tehran-helps-us-connect-with-ir/?page=all>

<sup>45</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>46</sup> Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba, 22 octombrie 1962, in „The Public Papers of the Presidents of the US, John F. Kennedy: 1962”, : containing the public messages, speeches, and statements of the president, p. 806- 809.

<sup>47</sup> Secretary Clinton's Interview with BBC Persia, 26 octombrie 2011, <http://london.usembassy.gov/iran012.html> (accesat 1.05.2012)

<sup>48</sup> Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba, 22 octombrie 1962, în The Public Papers of the Presidents of the US, John F. Kennedy: 1962 : containing the public messages, speeches, and statements of the president, pg. 806- 809

<sup>49</sup> Secretary Clinton's Interview with BBC Persia, 26 octombrie 2011, <http://london.usembassy.gov/iran012.html> (accesat 1.05.2012)

<sup>50</sup> Radio and Television Report to the American People on the Soviet Arms Buildup in Cuba, 22 octombrie 1962, în The Public Papers of the Presidents of the US, John F. Kennedy: 1962 : containing the public messages, speeches, and statements of the president, pg. 806- 809

#### 4. American virtual embassy to Iran: between business as usual and innovation

*This site is aimed at enhancing outreach and dialogue between the American and Iranian people.*

At first sight, the websites of the Iranian and Romanian embassies are identical, at least in layout. The home page menu begins to reveal differences starting with the fourth tab. What most American embassies websites display as News and Events becomes *in Tehran*<sup>51</sup> News and U.S. Policy. Two new sections follow: Study in the USA and Open Societies; these sections are not part of other websites, such as the embassy of Iraq, Afghanistan, or even Belarus – one of the most controversial European countries.

##### News and U.S. Policy section

This section contains Key Reports, Speeches & Remarks, Statements & Transcripts, Fact Sheets and the eJournal USA. The section opens up with a “Myths vs. Facts” disclaimer on the front page, in which the embassy tries to lay out the basis of the genuine US policy towards Iran.

The virtual embassy team tries to combat the myth that Americans are looking to undermine the Iranian nation and pushing for a regime change, thus supporting the strategic objective of countering misconceptions. The main argument is that the U.S. fully supports international norms both at home and abroad, unlike the Iranian government. One cannot help but notice the antagonism used repetitively by the American government. Other myths they are trying to ward off are that the America wants to keep Iran weak and isolated and that is the reason why it is against Iran’s nuclear program and its scientific development, that it wants to install a puppet regime in Iran like it did in 1953 or supports terrorist groups, that the sanctions regime is a punishment inflicted on the Iranian people because of the 1979 hostage crisis. The last myth is not that specifically related to the relation with Iran, but it regards the Muslim World as a whole: “The U.S. is anti-Islam and opposes Iran for endorsing Islamic principles.”<sup>52</sup> The embassy is using Obama’s 2009 Cairo speech as a rebuttal to this myth, in which the administration was looking for a new beginning with the Islamic world. For a public diplomacy initiative, the front page of this section is a bit peculiar as it mentions Iranian people only 3 times, and the Iranian government 7 times. However, this as a result of the strategic positioning of US efforts in the region as being positive and in full contradiction with the negative behavior of the Iranian political leaders.

On this first page, the word “nuclear” shows up 15 times and the phrase “human rights” is used 7 times. The numbers increase if this count is performed

<sup>51</sup> The U.S. is being represented in Iran by Switzerland.

<sup>52</sup> <http://iran.usembassy.gov/news-policy.html>

for the available documents that pertain to this section. For example, in 2012, materials referenced “human rights” 20 times the very least, “freedom” was referenced 10 times, and “nuclear” – only 7 times, but it was associated explicitly with Iran only 3 times. In 2015, the toll is much higher, considering the fact that new documents were added.

The Key Reports section displays 18 reports related to human rights, trafficking in persons, terrorism and religious freedoms starting with 2010. The bulk of these reports dates from 2010 and 2011, only two documents being uploaded in 2013 and 2014 – these are merely introductions to country reports on human rights practices, but not the full reports on the situation in Iran. The country reports are published by the Department of State every year and they evaluate the situation in each country: last year, the report noticed a decline in civil liberties in Iran. In addition, if in 2013 the introductory report from the virtual embassy was redirecting users to the State Department’s website – on which users can read the full report for each country, in 2014 only the introductory text is displayed directly on the virtual embassy page. This suggests a change in approach.

The eJournal section is a replica of the <http://www.america.gov/> magazine, which was decommissioned. It publishes articles on a large array of topics, such as democracy, nonviolent change, mass-media, immigrants, studying in the US. The style of these articles is as objective as possible, short and concise. Unfortunately, the numbers of the eJournal are not ordered depending on the topic or the date of publication, which makes it a very difficult section to navigate through. Additionally, most journal numbers date between 2006 and 2010. The disregard of constant and up to date activity on the virtual embassy is noteworthy: the latest number of the eJournal showed up on June 27, 2014<sup>53</sup>.

Most recent published speeches are *President Obama’s remarks to the United General Assembly, September 2015* (September 2015); *Statement by the President on Hajj and Eid al-Adha* (October 2014) and *Statement by the President on Airstrikes in Syria* (September 2014). Other speeches include excerpts from the State of the Union, regarding the war in Syria or the situation in Iraq and the nuclear program, which are actually the major foreign policy concerns for the bilateral affairs. The selection of the speeches is indicative of the fact that the activity on this website is quite infrequent. Even more striking, is the fact that Obama’s speech to the United General Assembly was overtly criticized for “Death to America” chant references:

“The Iranian people have a proud history, and are filled with extraordinary potential. But chanting *Death to America* does not create jobs, or make Iran more secure. If Iran chose a different path, that would be good for the security of the

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<sup>53</sup> EJUUSA: Strategic Moves: Using Smart Sanctions in the 21st Century, June 27, 2014, <http://iipdigital.usembassy.gov/st/english/publication/2014/06/20140603300722.html?CP.rss=true#axzz3nEUVJJHa>

region, good for the Iranian people, and good for the world.”<sup>54</sup> Surprisingly enough, the speech at the United General Assembly mentioned Iranian people only 2 times, and failed to offer new beginnings like the address in Cairo in 2009 despite the much expected détente which should have come with the signing of the nuclear deal. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani picked up the debate around the chant and explained for the American TV channel CBS that the slogan is not directed against the American people, but against those American policies that are adverse to the interests of the Iranian people<sup>55</sup>. It is noteworthy that the “Death to America” slogan was actually developed by Obama in August 2015, when he held a speech on the Iran nuclear deal, in which the hardliners were accused of chanting the slogan<sup>56</sup>. A more positive message was sent to the Iranian people in 2014, on the occasion of Nowruz (Iranian New Year). Unlike the UNGA remarks, this one was addressed directly to the Iranian people, whom Barack Obama congratulated for making “your voice heard” in the elections that led to Rouhani’s term<sup>57</sup>.

The Nowruz address was abundant with positive figures of speech: “deep respect”, “move beyond our difficult history”, “resolves the world’s concerns”, “extraordinary skills and contributions you have to offer”, “greater trust and cooperation”<sup>58</sup>. Furthermore, this message creates a clear link between nuclear negotiations and public diplomacy, conditioning the opening of the two nations to the achievement of a diplomatic breakthrough regarding Iran’s nuclear program: “It will mean more opportunities for Iranians to trade and forge ties with the rest of the world. It will mean more economic growth and jobs for Iranians, especially young Iranians who dream of making their mark in the world. It will mean more opportunities for Iranian students to travel abroad and build new partnerships that help you realize your incredible potential.”<sup>59</sup>

The change in rhetoric is rather interesting. One would expect friendlier messages from Washington D.C. to the streets of Tehran in the context of the new nuclear deal which was reached in the summer of 2015, especially in a country which does not view the US favorably. A public opinion study commissioned by the Center For International & Security Studies At Maryland last year revealed that 71% Iranians hold negative views of America, most of them due to past US

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<sup>54</sup> *Remarks By President Obama To The United Nations General Assembly*, September 28, 2015, New York, <http://iran.usembassy.gov/unga2015.html>

<sup>55</sup> Julian Hattem, “Iran’s president defends ‘Death to America’ chants”, *The Hill*, September 18, 2015, <http://thehill.com/policy/national-security/254225-irans-rouhani-death-to-america-not-meant-against-the-american-people>

<sup>56</sup> *Remarks by the President on Iran Nuclear Deal*, August 5 2015, American University, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/08/05/remarks-president-iran-nuclear-deal>

<sup>57</sup> *President Obama's 2014 Nowruz Message*, March 14, 2014, Washington D.C., <http://iran.usembassy.gov/nowruz1393final.html>

<sup>58</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibidem*.

policies and a lack of trust<sup>60</sup>. What is more, 75% Iranians believe that the US is likely to continue the sanctions regime against Iran in spite of the nuclear deal, because they have other reasons behind, such as dominating or making Iran weak (53%) or overthrowing the regime (11%). With this in mind, it looks that the main purpose of this section – to counter myths about America’s intentions – was not that successful.

### Study in the USA

The fact that there is a separate section called Study in the USA is revealing two aspects: the educational exchanges are an important part of the American public diplomacy and the main target audience of the virtual embassy is the educated Iranian youth. Along with information about visa and how to apply to a US university, this section also displays information on Student Life, which is telling for the messages that the virtual embassy wants to disseminate about the American lifestyle. Students can find out about the possibility of keeping a *halal* diet or going to a mosque in the United States or how to improve their English skills. This information is meant to enforce the idea that America is a multicultural country, which cherishes diversity. They are also exposed to information on teaching methods, which are positioned as the equivalent of a democratic life: dialogue, freedom of speech, participation are cornerstones of the American education system (“focus on discussion among students and the professor”, “not only attending classes but actively taking part in them, asking questions and contributing to discussions”, “give your own opinion and interpretations”<sup>61</sup>).

According to the Open Doors survey, the number of Iranians studying in the U.S. increased with 16.6% from 2012/2013 to 2013/2014: from 8744 students coming from Iran to study in the US in 2012, the number went up to 10194 in 2013<sup>62</sup>. It is difficult to assess whether the existence of the virtual embassy influenced the increase. Nonetheless, according to Open Doors, approximately 1% of international students in the US are Iranians.

### Open Societies

This section should carve the most compelling case for US public diplomacy efforts in Iran. The phrase “open societies” presents itself with the advantage of starting the public discourse with the general universal rights framework and picking up the idea that the American society is a democratic, tolerant, perfect society.

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<sup>60</sup> Ebrahim Mohseni, Nancy Gallagher, Clay Ramsay, *Iranian attitudes on nuclear negotiations. A public opinion study*, September 2014, Center For International & Security Studies At Maryland, Maryland, p. 23. [http://worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/2014/iranian\\_attitudes\\_on\\_nuclear\\_negotations\\_final\\_091614.pdf](http://worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/2014/iranian_attitudes_on_nuclear_negotations_final_091614.pdf)

<sup>61</sup> <http://iran.usembassy.gov/education/student-life.html>

<sup>62</sup> <http://www.iie.org/en/Research-and-Publications/Open-Doors/Data/International-Students/Leading-Places-of-Origin/2012-14>



The Human Rights column only displays a couple of articles on human rights and then replicates a couple of speeches and key reports from other sections. Most of the references on this column prefer a facts and figures approach, which aims at carving a bad record on human rights and freedoms for Iran. For the Civil Society column, State Department has prepared 5 articles on civil rights pioneer Martin Luther King and women rights, two speeches back when Hillary Clinton was still Secretary of State and an incorrect link to one of the Department's conferences on Open Government. The lack of up to date content is stunning. Since internet was for Clinton one of the beacons of freedom of speech, there is also a column called 21<sup>st</sup> Century Internet, which clones the same layout as the Civil Society one, only that the content differs. These 3 columns don't actually benefit from town content of their being uploaded on the respective pages, but they are made up of links which redirect users to the digital archive of the Bureau of International Information Programs. The Reading Corner is perhaps the scantiest of these columns in terms of general, educational available resources: it has only 6 links which concern NGOs, independent journalism, democracy, economy and media topics.

The only columns that include content of their own, being uploaded on the website, are the American Way of Life, Prominent Iranian-Americans, Cross-Cultural and Global Village columns. The uploaded materials are formatted as short, educational articles on the American Constitution and government, elections (including an article about the role of women in politics), Christmas and Thanksgiving, Titanic, African-Americans, all in all a wide range of topics. Articles with political references such as "An American Hero in Iran" were actually removed in a peculiar way: in 2012, the article was displayed, but not entirely; today, it simply redirects to another article, "A Museum Curator's Journey with Islamic Art". It is unclear if the virtual embassy staff was behind this move or if they are unaware of the discrepancy. The discourse behind these materials is based on logic, and not emotions, and it tries to maintain objectivity. In addition, the political materials also reference socio-economic factors. In the Cross-Cultural column there is a plethora of targeted articles such as "Volleyball Diplomacy Strengthens U.S. – Iran relation" (from August 2014) and "Virtual Music Ambassadors<sup>63</sup> from Iran" (March 2012). The second article is a best practice in public diplomacy materials: it uses the plural "we" most of the times (Hillary Clinton used it 150times during her BBC Persia interview) to induce the idea of a mutual dialogue between nations. The authors of this article also capitalize on the bridge metaphor, music being envisaged as a tool for making up for the lack of American diplomatic staff in Iran. The "electronic curtain" metaphor, overused when it comes to the Iranian regime, is followed by an ascending enumeration: "limit what its citizens see, hear, think, and feel", which helps emphasize the controlling and intrusive character of the regime. The

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<sup>63</sup> This is the successor of the Jazz Ambassadors program, launched in 1955.

innovative part of this short text is in the end, when it is mentioned that during a poll of the Iranian audience, it was discovered that Iranians enjoy rock music. Therefore, the embassy also invites Iranians to view a couple of Youtube videos of the rock band Mankind is Obsolete and to give feedback to the embassy on what they think about the band<sup>64</sup>.

The linchpin of this section is, nevertheless, the List of Prominent Iranian-Americans, which based on the website page source seems to have been added on July 23, 2015. Not only that this seems to be the most up to date column, but it also echoes the Shared Values campaign. 91 Iranian-Americans were listed on the website, such as CNN news anchor Christiane Amanpour, Sahar Nowrouzadeh – former NSC staffer supporting the P5+1 negotiations and Maz Jobrani – prominent comedian, among many others. On the right side of the website, there are also video interviews with 8 Iranian-Americans who discuss about their life in the U.S., much like the Muslims that talk about their life in the Shared Values campaign.

Department of State has faced difficulties when uploading proper content on the website. One day after the launch, the website was blocked: Iranian new agencies did not welcome the virtual embassy, criticizing the initiative for lacking effectiveness and rendering it to the status of a mere social platform<sup>65</sup>, even though the virtual platform itself doesn't have too many features of engaging with the Iranian public, except for the Communities link (blogs and social media channels). Immediately after the shutdown, the American administration condemned, yet again, the building of an “electronic curtain of surveillance and censorship” around the Iranian people and emphasized that the U.S. is still looking to generate dialogue with the Iranian people<sup>66</sup>. The rhetoric should not come as a surprise. Joseph S. Nye remarked that the Internet is a much more aggressive and uncertain space and equated cyber aggressions to real-world ones<sup>67</sup>.

## 5. Conclusions

Department of State strategic plan for fiscal years 2007-2012 outlined the need to increase “broadcasting, cultural and educational exchanges, and democracy programming in Iran”, as part of its regional priorities. Concerning

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<sup>64</sup> U.S. Department of State Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, *Virtual Music Ambassadors for Iran*, March 12, 2012, <http://iran.usembassy.gov/intromusicamb.html>

<sup>65</sup> J. David Goodman, *Iran Shatters U.S. Embassy on the Web*, The New York Times, December 7 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/08/world/middleeast/iran-shatters-us-embassy-on-the-web.html>

<sup>66</sup> Statement by the Press Secretary on Iran's Blockage of Virtual Embassy Tehran, White House, December 7 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/07/statement-press-secretary-irans-blockage-virtual-embassy-tehran>

<sup>67</sup> Joseph Nye, *Cyber War and Peace*, April 10 2012, Project-Syndicate, <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/cyber-war-and-peace>

public diplomacy in the region, the main purpose was to counter misconceptions about America and its intentions in the region<sup>68</sup>. The layout and content of the virtual embassy are clearly supportive of this mission: the home page of the website attempts to counter myths and misconceptions, the Study in USA column aims to facilitate cultural and educational exchanges and, last but not least, the Open Societies column aspires to inspire democratic values.

Opening a virtual embassy to Tehran was perceived as a highly innovative strategy in the beginning, even though critics diagnosed it from the onset as inefficient without ground presence<sup>69</sup>. The fact that, 3 years after the launch, more than 50% Iranians still perceived the U.S. negatively, supports the lack of effectiveness of such an initiative.

On the other hand, the failure of the virtual embassy should not be attributed solely to the argument that the Internet is not efficient public diplomacy tool. From the onset, in the About Us section of the virtual embassy, the State Department added a relevant disclaimer stating that the website is merely an informal channel, which does not represent “a real U.S. embassy accredited to the Iranian Government”<sup>70</sup>. This condescending view of the virtual embassy might explain the lack of a customized communication strategy. The abundance of outdated content is also curtailing the relevance of this effort: after John Kerry replaced Hillary Clinton, the virtual embassy seems to have fallen off from the priority list. Most of the content dates back to 2011 and 2012, only a couple of articles having been uploaded during Kerry’s term as Secretary of State. Hillary Clinton invested a great deal of personal effort in this initiative: she even filmed a video for the launch in 2011, inviting Iranians to engage with America openly. On the other hand, John Kerry’s staff is reluctant to talking about the virtual embassy. In a recent Washington Times piece, a staffer agreed to talk about the embassy anonymously and he praised the addition of the Faces of Iran portlet (which displays Iranians imprisoned unjustly) and the fact that the social media fan base of the embassy has increased 600% to 510245 fans. He also mentioned that the use of social media helps bypass censorship, since even though Facebook is not allowed in Iran, people use proxy servers to log in<sup>71</sup>.

The communication strategy behind the virtual embassy also lacks substance. Apart from a couple of resources being directed to the Iranian public,

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<sup>68</sup> *Strategic Plan Fiscal Year 2007-2012*, U.S. Department of State, U.S. Agency for International Development, May 7 2007, <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/86291.pdf>, p. 50

<sup>69</sup> In comparison, the websites of the US embassy in Indonesia (where there’s also a on the ground presence) has 20.000 fans. (Helle C. Dale, *Public Diplomacy 2.0: Where the U.S. Government Meets New Media*, “The Backgrounder”, no. 2346, The Heritage Foundation, 8 decembrie 2009, p. 10)

<sup>70</sup> <http://iran.usembassy.gov/about-us.html>

<sup>71</sup> Guy Taylor, “‘Virtual U.S. Embassy Tehran’ helps U.S. connect with Iranians on Facebook”, *The Washington Times*, June 3, 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/jun/3/virtual-us-embassy-tehran-helps-us-connect-with-ir/?page=all>

most of the content is actually comprised of links which redirect users to the International Information Program digital archive. The website is translated in more languages, such as Spanish, French, Russian, Arabic, Chinese, Portuguese, Urdu and, last but not least, Persian, which suggests the fact that the U.S. public diplomacy efforts are not very strategic in defining the messages according to their target audience. This is what Kirstin M. Lord called a “communication disaster”<sup>72</sup>. On the other hand, the virtual embassy aligns to the national strategy: portraying America as a positive example is coupled with condemning the Iranian regime as evil, an oxymoronic pairing which was heavily used during the Cold War. Isolating Iran, just like JFK did with Cuba in 1962, induces the sentiment of fear: Iran and U.S. are confronting each other in a diplomatic crisis, but also in a clash of values. Connecting most of the topics to the American values, which are universal from the American point of view, is another Cold War technique: State Department is looking to create an “imagined community of the free world”<sup>73</sup>, in which all individuals are avid for freedom. The major difference from the Cold War practice is that the online medium has deleted frontiers and collapsed distances, and the goal of the public diplomacy is not to contain the Iranians, but to actually engage them and create a sense of shared values and interests<sup>74</sup>. Withal, there are major challenges to this approach. First and foremost, emphasizing values when communicating to a community who considers itself at antipodes from a cultural standpoint is unfortunate: less than 50% of Iranians consider the American way a good example, and persuasion fails to work if both parties are not viewing the message as a public asset<sup>75</sup>.

Apart from the limitations that the virtual embassy has shown so far, it still remains a good public diplomacy practice, worth considering in the new information societies. Actually, in the absence of a real diplomatic presence in Tehran, the virtual embassy might prove to be a good cost-effective substitute. If one takes into consideration the fact that, unlike other channels, the Internet offers plenty of solutions to circumvent jamming, the idea of a virtual embassy starts to seem a good one. But then again, as Zaharna reported, “the most daunting hurdle for U.S. public diplomacy is not developing innovative ways to reach out to the Muslim world, but rather reconciling inconsistencies between U.S. foreign policy and U.S. public diplomacy”<sup>76</sup>.

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<sup>72</sup> Liam Kennedy, Scott Lucas, *op. cit.*, p. 320.

<sup>73</sup> Ron Robin, *op. cit.*, p. 348.

<sup>74</sup> Liam Kennedy, Scott Lucas, *op. cit.*, p. 325.

<sup>75</sup> Charles Wolf Jr., Brian Rosen, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

<sup>76</sup> R. S. Zaharna, “Obama, U.S. Public Diplomacy and the Islamic World”, *World Politics Review*, 16 Mar 2009, p. 7