

AUB conference discusses connections and ruptures between America and the Middle East Tuesday, January 12, 2010

In a wide-ranging conference evaluating connections and ruptures between the United States and the Middle East on several levels, presenters quashed myths and unveiled truths about how the two cultures perceive each other.

Organized by the Center for American Study and Research (CASAR), “Connections and Ruptures: America and the Middle East” was held at AUB on January 7 and 8 and was inaugurated at the Commodore Hotel on January 6.

A comprehensive survey of US President Barak Obama’s foreign policy measures from January 2009 to January 2010 marked the opening ceremony of the center's third international conference.

Professor Maria Ryan from University of Nottingham was a member of a panel discussing the globalization of law and terrorism. She said that the war on terror was not meant to be restricted to the Middle East, but it also included countries in Africa, the Caspian region, and the western Pacific region.

She and others in the panel confirmed that US President Barack Obama is just continuing the foreign policies that were established during former President George W. Bush's term.

AUB Professor of Sociology and Media Studies Jad Melki presented the results of his study on media coverage of the July 2006 war by Arab, regional and international Western TV networks. His study focused on four US (ABC, NBC, CBS, and CNN), four Lebanese (LBC, Future News, Al-Manar, and Al-Jadeed), two Arab (Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiyya), and one Israeli TV (Channel 2) networks.

The analysis of the type and focus of the coverage led to the following: Western media are more likely to focus on Israel than on Lebanon in their stories.

The Israeli story was most dominant in the Israeli channel followed by US media.

While US and Israeli media were more likely to side with the Israeli perspective, sympathy toward Israel changed over time, dominating only the first part of the war and up to the Qana massacre.

Israel criticized itself more so than US TV networks criticized it, and thus included reports that blamed Israel for starting the war, whereas the US media under study never blamed Israel.

"The study showed clear ruptures between Arab and US TV coverage and clear connections between US and Israeli TV coverage," said Melki. "On the other hand, there is no uniformity among Arab and even Lebanese stations."

University of Tehran's Marziya Motaharri said that Western coverage of the 2009 Iranian presidential elections was skewed in favor of the opposition.

"There are many sides to a debate," she said. "Western media coverage magnified one side and degraded all others."

Oxford Professor Scott Lucas’s detail-packed lecture, “Blasts, Drones, and Tweets: Obama and the Perils of Intervention,” followed warm welcomes from the present and former directors of

CASAR, Professor Robert Myers and Arts and Sciences' Dean Patrick McGreevy, and from Provost Ahmad Dallal.

Among the exhaustive variety of topics embraced in more than 65 lectures were US foreign policy, American education in the Arab world, religion, philosophy, literature, film, music, cultural diplomacy, internet diplomacy, immigration and cultural identity, terrorism, democracy, and American Muslims.

The conference also gave fair attention to culture and the arts, with spotlights on poetry, literature, and even political hip-hop from the Middle East, featuring rhymes on Palestine, the war in Lebanon, and identity.

"It's hard livin' in the West—when I know the East got the best of me... (Destinyyy) could be lookin in my eyes—but you'll never see the rest of me... (Destinyyy)," rapped Omar Offendum, in his song called "Destiny."

Boston University's Betty Anderson gave insight into women's education at AUB from her forthcoming book (2011), a new history of the University emphasizing the students' viewpoint. A particularly intense and lengthy question and answer period followed lectures on apprehensions and misapprehensions about Iran.

In his closing address, "After Orientalism: Rethinking the Study of US-Middle East Relations," delivered to a packed audience in the Bathish Auditorium, Ussama Makdisi of Rice University asked that more attention be given to transnationalism and to exploration of the history of power relationships. Calling for a "reframed and revitalized conversation" between the United States and the Middle East, he said that studies should focus more on engagement than on simple representation.