

Nov 04, 2016 by **Mark Dillen**

Obama's PR Team Drops One ^[1]

In Washington last week I sat down with a group of bloggers to interview two smart and savvy foreign correspondents. The fact that they were women, representing influential media from the Middle East, made their views interesting on several levels.

Nadia Bilbassy is a correspondent with MBC (Middle East Broadcasting Co.) and Joyce Karam is with London-based Arabic language daily Al Hayat. MBC owns Al Jazeera.

Among their views, both complained that access to the Obama White House is not what you might think. After granting his first interview upon taking office to Al-Arabiya, President Barack Obama has not been particularly available to the Middle Eastern press corps.

Further, after the brilliant success of Obama's Cairo speech to the Muslim world, his team missed a major opportunity at the start of Ramadan. In organizing a White House dinner commemorating the start of the Muslim holy month, a tradition begun by George W. Bush, the Obama White House failed to invite the ambassadors from most of the majority Muslim countries. Yes, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, Indonesia and Turkey were on the guest list, but the rest of the Muslim world was left off. "They invited the Israeli Ambassador, but left off many ambassadors from Muslim countries," Bilbassy notes with exasperation.

This slip-up (and others like it) stand in contrast with Obama's sensitive understanding of the "Arab street" and the Muslim world in general, according to Bilbassy and Karam. Obama's Cairo speech is generally acknowledged to have been a masterpiece of political mass communication and these two correspondents second that opinion.

"Every broadcaster in the Middle East, except Syrian TV, carried the speech," says Karam. "His message is getting out. In fact, after the speech I had people coming up to me saying, 'Can you believe he spoke for 45 minutes without using any notes?' They didn't know he was using a teleprompter!"

After Obama's unsuccessful trip to Copenhagen last week on behalf of Chicago's Olympic bid, there are those who see weaknesses in his decision-making and communications. Chances are what is missing is a more seasoned staff to vet issues and to make sure he isn't spreading himself too thin.

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