

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

Changing the Subject ^[1]

Claremont, California

I've spent a day here in the suburbs of Los Angeles talking about the Middle East with students and faculty at my alma mater, Pomona College. The really interesting thing is that while I came to talk about Iraq, I keep getting asked about Israel and the Palestinians. Add in Monday's assassination of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and Iraq, the constant topic of the last two years, seems to have vanished from the agenda, at least for a moment.

The thing about living in the Middle East in general, and in Amman in particular, is that Iraq has a way of looming over nearly every conversation. Amman is the way station for virtually everyone traveling to or from Baghdad. The city is filled with exiles from street vendors to wealthy merchants. On both Arab satellite television and on CNN it is the first story in a generation that has managed to push the Israeli-Palestinian conflict off center-stage for more than a few weeks.

Any yet in the four days I have been in the United States people have asked me about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at least twice as often as about Iraq. What is happening here? Has the carnage in Baghdad numbed us to the story? Is the daily news from Iraq so repetitive that people have finally tuned out and moved on (as for popular media, I gave up on the radio on the drive out from Los Angeles this morning after finding every talk radio outlet – including Rush Limbaugh and Bill O'Reilly – talking about the Michael Jackson trial)?

If one accepts the (in my opinion overly narrow) definition of public diplomacy as the selling of the administration's policies then this, I suppose, must be counted a victory. But it is dangerous to assume that if Americans are not paying attention then no one else is. That surely would be a gross misreading of the situation. Iraq is a long-term project, both our involvement there per se and undoing the damage our adventure there has done to our image in the wider world. It is important to talk about what we are doing – or at least what we think we are doing – as long as this mess continues.

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