



~MIDDLE EAST MEDIA MONITOR~  
WikiLeaks in the Arab Press

By Tally Helfont

*Middle East Media Monitor is a new FPRI E-Note series, designed to review once a month a current topic from the perspective of the foreign language press in such countries as Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Turkey. These articles will focus on providing FPRI's readership with an inside view on how some of the most important countries in the Middle East are covering issues of importance to the American foreign policy community.*

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On November 28, 2010, WikiLeaks—a non-profit media organization known for publishing secret and classified information obtained from anonymous sources—released 250,000 American diplomatic cables, detailing high-level meetings between prominent American diplomats and their international counterparts. These cables, many of which dealt with the Middle East and featured frank and often embarrassing statements by several Arab leaders, sent ripples throughout the region.<sup>1</sup> The disproportionately high number of cables dealing with the Middle East has been attributed to the United States' increased focus on the region during the past decade, in addition to the “war on terror.”<sup>2</sup> Coverage of the leaks, or more specifically the extent and frequency of the coverage, has varied from country to country. In a region where secrecy is paramount and “public candor is rare,” the WikiLeaks cables highlight the great divide between Arab public opinion which, “tends to favor a strong Iran, even a nuclear-armed Iran, as a counterweight to Israel and to US hegemony” and the hawkish views of Arab leaders about “Persians or pragmatism about Israel.”<sup>3</sup>

Given that Arab governments enjoy little popular support, its leaders largely express these views in private. WikiLeaks, therefore, exposed some of these leaders in an unfavorable light to their populations. In fact, given the recent events in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen, many in the region have begun asking whether the WikiLeaks revelations may have contributed to the sudden explosion of angry protests and demands for regime change in these countries.<sup>4</sup> Looking at the way in which the Arab press covered the WikiLeaks scandal is therefore important to understanding some of the main grievances driving current Middle Eastern affairs today.

Outrage has been a dominant theme in many WikiLeaks articles in the Arab press. Al-Jazeera's Larbi Sadiki writes, “The US embassy cables show Western diplomats pursuing with dedication their people's interests. For that they must be respected. By contrast, some Arab politicians are inviting invasion, bombing and conspiring against fellow citizens.”<sup>5</sup> Rami Khouri of Lebanon's Daily Star writes that “The assorted Arab leaders who are quoted as asking the United States to hurry up and do something about Iran's growing nuclear technology capabilities reveal an apparent inability to take care of their own

<sup>1</sup> See: “Wikileaks Exposes America's Diplomacy (WikiLeaks Yafdah Al-Diblomasiya Al-Amerikiya),” *Al-Jazeera (Qatar) – Arabic*, November 29, 2010 [www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/5231D282-A1CF-49AF-97A7-F28FF06EA3DF.htm](http://www.aljazeera.net/NR/exeres/5231D282-A1CF-49AF-97A7-F28FF06EA3DF.htm)

<sup>2</sup> “Analysts: The Focus of the Publication of the “WikLeaks” Documents on the Middle East is Due to American Activity in it (*Muhallilun: Tarkiz Nashar Watha'iq “WikiLeaks” ‘ala Asharq Al-Awsat BiSabab Al-Nashat Fiha*),” *Asharq Al-Awsat (Saudi Arabia)*, December 11, 2010. <http://www.aawsat.com/details.asp?section=4&article=598990&issueno=11701>

<sup>3</sup> Ian Black, “WikiLeaks Cables: Arab Media Hold Back on Revelations about their Leaders,” *The Guardian*, December 1, 2010. [www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/01/on-the-middle-east-wikileaks](http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/dec/01/on-the-middle-east-wikileaks)

<sup>4</sup> Mohammad Kamil, “Experts: “WikiLeaks Leaks” Contributed to the Tunisian ‘Popular Uprising’ (*Khubara: «Tasribat WikiLeaks» Sahamat fi «al-Intifadah al-Shabiya» al-Tunisiya*),” *Al-Masry Al-Youm*, January 15, 2011 <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/news/-خيراء-تسريرات-ويكيليكس-ساهمت-في-الانتفاضة-الشعبية-التونسية>

<sup>5</sup> Larbi Sadiki, “Sex, Lies and Diplomatic Cables,” *Al-Jazeera (Qatar) – English*, December 8, 2010. <http://english.aljazeera.net/indepth/opinion/2010/12/2010125105945256495.html>

countries and citizens.”<sup>6</sup> Sadiki, however, takes a bleaker view, saying, “As ever, in the Middle East, one person's viper is another man's 'alpha dog'. Otherwise how does one explain that Abbas [Palestinian Authority] and Al-Salih [Yemen], who collaborate in the bombing of their own peoples, are granted legitimacy, cash, and weapons. Those who resist occupation are threatened with war and international courts!”<sup>7</sup> More than anything, sentiments in the Arab press express a sense of being thrown to the wolves by those in power.

Perceptions of the impact of the leaked cables have been divided. Some in the Arab press, such as Asharq Al-Awsat's Tariq Al-Homayed argue that “the world will inevitably be changed by this...We are truly living in a post-WikiLeaks world today.” He goes on to explain that “This does not just mean that nobody will trust the Americans, but that nobody will trust any diplomat.” Al-Homayed likened the new circumstances to “everybody playing the game with their cards exposed.”<sup>8</sup> Others, such as Zaid Derweesh, have suggested that the impact of WikiLeaks would be negligible considering that “Citizens of the Arab world... know that what is said in public by their leaders differs greatly from what goes on behind closed doors. They also know that their governments will go along with whatever the US asks of them.” However, according to Derweesh, “What may come as a surprise to some will be the degree to which this subservience occurs.”<sup>9</sup> This sentiment affirms the dominant view on the *Arab street* that its leaders are weak and will bend to the United States' will at the cost of their people.

So what have the U.S. diplomats and their Arab counterparts been chatting about so fervently? As Sadiki puts it, “the cables show linguistic cacophony, and, in terms of interests, harmony. Security, security, security! Terrorists, Gitmo detainees, Iranian nukes, Hamas, and Hezbollah are the addiction as well as the obsession of Middle Eastern diplomacy.”<sup>10</sup> Foremost on the minds of these diplomats, however, is Iran and its nuclear ambitions. Karim Sadjadpour, of *The Financial Times* of London, offers a colorful account, writing that “if extra-terrestrials were to have read Monday's WikiLeaks revelations on the Middle East, they would conclude that the earth's two superpowers are the US and Iran. The Iranian menace dominates Washington's diplomatic discussions.” The WikiLeaks revelations make it quite clear that “Arab officials believe Iran to be inherently dishonest and dangerous” and that Sunni Arab leaders, and especially the Saudis, strongly encouraged America “to deliver Shia Iran its military comeuppance.”<sup>11</sup>

Anxiety among Arab leaders over Tehran's growing power, according to the diplomatic cables, led to both sharp language and decisive measures. Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah was the most outspoken on the Iran issue, having repeatedly urged U.S. diplomats to attack Iran in order to “cut off the head of the snake.”<sup>12</sup> Jordanian officials are revealed in the cables to have described Iran as a shrewd octopus extending its tentacles to manipulate and undermine the plans of the West and of moderates in the region. The Jordanians cited Qatar, Syria, Hezbollah, Hamas, (occasionally) the Iraqi government, and Shiite communities in the region among the so-called tentacles.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Jordan's King Abdullah II warned U.S. Special Envoy George Mitchell that U.S. dialogue with Iran could provoke divisions between Arab states, undermining the moderate Arabs, without persuading Iran to halt its support for terrorism, freeze its nuclear program, or give up its ambitions to dominate.<sup>14</sup>

However, Arab leaders did not express their fears about Iran solely to the United States. Arab leaders also took decisive action to engage, albeit secretly, with the only other nation that appeared to be taking the Iranian threat as seriously as they were: Israel. The Saudi newspaper *Elaph* reported that, according to diplomatic cables from 2009, secret, high-level meetings were conducted between Israel and Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the Sultanate of Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. Despite hostile public rhetoric against Israel and the fact that these Arab countries do not recognize the Jewish state, Arab diplomats secretly asked Tel Aviv to convey messages to the U.S. government, urging it to take tougher action against Tehran.<sup>15</sup> This revelation particularly incensed scores of columnists in the Arab world.

The extent to which various commentators in the Arab press perceive that WikiLeaks will impact the diplomatic environment seems to depend on how seriously they take these leaks. Some question the validity of the cables. For example, Asa'd Abu Khalil, a writer for the *Angry Arab* blog, voiced his suspicions about the WikiLeaks cables arguing that many of “the

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<sup>6</sup> Rami G. Khouri, “Wikileaks Helped Expose the Indignities of Arab Leaders,” *The Daily Star (Lebanon)*, December 1, 2010.

[www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition\\_id=10&categ\\_id=5&article\\_id=122050#ixzz1AC8x6FC7](http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=5&article_id=122050#ixzz1AC8x6FC7)

<sup>7</sup> Larbi Sadiki, “Sex, Lies and Diplomatic Cables.”

<sup>8</sup> Tariq Alhomayed, “A Post-WikiLeaks World,” *Asharq Al-Awsat (Saudi Arabia)*, December 4, 2010.

[www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=2&id=23266](http://www.aawsat.com/english/news.asp?section=2&id=23266)

<sup>9</sup> Zaid Derweesh, “Arab Reaction to the Latest Wikileaks Document Drop,” *Suite101.com*, November 30, 2010. [www.suite101.com/content/arab-reaction-to-the-latest-wikileaks-document-drop-a315333](http://www.suite101.com/content/arab-reaction-to-the-latest-wikileaks-document-drop-a315333); Black, “WikiLeaks Cables: Arab Media Hold Back on Revelations about their Leaders.”

<sup>10</sup> Larbi Sadiki, “Sex, Lies and Diplomatic Cables.”

<sup>11</sup> Karim Sadjadpour, “WikiLeaks Should Prompt a Rethink on Iran,” *The Financial Times*, November 30, 2010.

<sup>12</sup> “WikiLeaks”: Saudis Urged the United States to “Decapitate the Snake (“WikiLeaks”: *Al-Saudiun Hathu Wilayat al-Mutahida ‘ala Qata’a Ras Al-Afa’a*),” *Al-Quds (Jerusalem)*, November 29, 2010 [www.alquds.com/node/307283](http://www.alquds.com/node/307283)

<sup>13</sup> “WikiLeaks: Arab Concern Over American-Iranian Dialogue (*WikiLeaks: Qalaq ‘Arabi Min Hiwar Ameriki – Irani*),” *Elaph Online (Saudi Arabia)*, December 1, 2010. [www.elaph.com/Web/news/2010/12/615124.html](http://www.elaph.com/Web/news/2010/12/615124.html)

<sup>14</sup> “WikiLeaks: Arab Concern Over American-Iranian,” *Elaph Online*.

<sup>15</sup> “WikiLeaks: Arab Concern Over American-Iranian,” *Elaph Online*.

revelations about the Middle East were largely either known or expected” and that “there is not a single document that is embarrassing to Israel. Not one.”<sup>16</sup> Others have attempted to downplay their content as being, in the words of Gulf Cooperation Council Secretary-General, Abdul Rahman Atiyah, unreliable and based on “guesses or analyses that can hit or miss.”<sup>17</sup> Al-Homayed cautions that “We must take care that not everything written by the American embassies is fact; some of these reports have been taken out of context.”<sup>18</sup>

Various Arab leaders, who were caught saying some embarrassing things, have echoed this line. The Jordanians were quick to issue a statement in light of their indelicate views on Iran being aired, declaring that “the Jordanian government officials are the only ones who represent the official positions of Jordan” and that the cables “reflect the analysis of U.S. officials and their readings” of the situation.<sup>19</sup> Even more embarrassing was the Lebanese scandal in which, according to the cables, Lebanese Defense Minister Elias El-Murr offered U.S. officials advice on how Israel could defeat Hezbollah in a future war and vowed to keep the Lebanese army out of the fighting.<sup>20</sup> Despite the almost instantaneous statement issued by Murr’s Assistant, George Soulage, that the defense minister’s comments were “out of context and inaccurate,” the press had a field day. Sadiki sums up the general Arab press account of the scandal, writing “With a Defense Minister like Mr. El-Murr, who needs enemies?”<sup>21</sup>

Another determining factor in the extent of WikiLeaks media coverage has been the strictness of the regimes in power and the fear of retribution by newspapers and columnists. For example, the Lebanese newspaper, Al-Akhbar, which published the Murr story, shut down directly following its publication of the leaked U.S. diplomatic cables, purportedly due to a hacker attack. In Morocco, the Ministry of Communications blocked the distribution of several foreign newspapers including the French *Le Monde*, the Spanish *El Pais*, and the London-based *Al-Quds Al-Arabi* for publishing information from the leaked diplomatic cables. This censorship was apparently based on an article in Morocco’s press code, which stipulates that the Ministry of Communications has the right to prohibit any publication of articles that undermine religion, territorial integrity and the monarchy.<sup>22</sup> In Qatar, Al-Jazeera has been coy about reporting its leaders’ blunders. These leaders were identified in the cables as deliberately using the Al Jazeera channel as a bargaining tool in negotiations with some countries and offering to cancel some of its critical reports and programming in exchange for certain concessions.<sup>23</sup>

At first, the major Arab news outlets focused less on calls by Arab leaders for strikes against Iran, ties to Israel, and cooperation with the United States and more on American difficulties with WikiLeaks, the legal woes of WikiLeaks and its founder, or general musings on media and diplomacy.<sup>24</sup> However, with the recent events in Tunisia and throughout the Middle East, the focus has shifted somewhat from these topics to coverage on the extent of government corruption in these various countries; a theme which was quite apparent in the WikiLeaks cables.

It remains to be seen whether the publication of this trove of documents will have the resounding impact on Middle East diplomacy that has been heralded by some. However in the press, as the most recent events have demonstrated, the next big story has already displaced the WikiLeaks scandal, leaving diplomats and politicians to return to their craft away from the limelight.

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<sup>16</sup> Asa'd Abu Khalil, “Wikileaks: Fishy?” *The Angry Arab News Service*, November 30, 2010. <http://angryarab.blogspot.com/2010/11/wikileaks-fishy-secllection.html>; Black, “WikiLeaks Cables: Arab Media Hold Back on Revelations about their Leaders.”

<sup>17</sup> Kareem Shaheen, “Sheikh Abdullah Calls for End to Iran Stand-off,” *The National (Abu Dhabi)*, December 8, 2010. [www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/sheikh-abdullah-calls-for-end-to-iran-stand-off](http://www.thenational.ae/news/uae-news/sheikh-abdullah-calls-for-end-to-iran-stand-off)

<sup>18</sup> Tariq Al-Homayad, “U.S. Documents Scandal (*Fadīhat al-Watha'iq Al-Amerikiya*),” *Asharq Al-Awsat (Saudi Arabia)*, November 30, 2010. <<http://aawsat.com/leader.asp?section=3&issueno=11690&article=597471>>

<sup>19</sup> “WikiLeaks: Arab Concern Over American-Iranian,” *Elaph Online*.

<sup>20</sup> “(WikiLeaks): ‘The Lebanese Minister of Defense’ Advised Israel on How to Eliminate Hezbollah (WikiLeaks: *Wazir al-Difa' al-Lubnani Nasah Isra'il BiKayfiyah al-Qada' Ala HizbAllah*),” *Watan News*, December 4, 2010. [www.watnnews.net/NewsDetails.aspx?PageID=3&NewsID=18134](http://www.watnnews.net/NewsDetails.aspx?PageID=3&NewsID=18134)

<sup>21</sup> Sadiki, “Sex, Lies and Diplomatic Cables.”

<sup>22</sup> “WikiLeaks: des journaux étrangers "interdits d'entrée" au Maroc,” *Le Monde (France)*, December 14, 2010.

[www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2010/12/14/wikileaks-des-journaux-etrangeurs-interdits-d-entree-au-maroc\\_1453404\\_3212.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2010/12/14/wikileaks-des-journaux-etrangeurs-interdits-d-entree-au-maroc_1453404_3212.html)

<sup>23</sup> “Wikileaks: Qatar Used ‘Al Jazeera’ as a Bargaining Tool in Negotiations with the States (WikiLeaks: *Qatar Tastakhdim 'Al-Jazeera' Kaadah Musawamah fi Mufawadatoha m'a al-Duwal*),” *Al-Youm El-Sabia*, December 6, 2010. <[www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=314761](http://www.youm7.com/News.asp?NewsID=314761)>

<sup>24</sup> For a statistical breakdown of how various Arab news outlets have covered the WikiLeaks story, see: David Pollock, “PolicyWatch #1733: WikiLeaks, Gulf Arabs, and Iran: An Opportunity for U.S. Policy,” *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 15, 2010. [www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3283](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3283)