Panel Discusses Efficacy of Cultural Exchange

BY COLIN MORRIS

In times of rising global tensions and political strife, cultural awareness and understanding will functionally be promoted through the arts.

The nature and efficacy of cultural diplomacy, specifically in regards to improving the U.S.'s standing in the Middle East and beyond, was emphasized by an expert panel during the School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) conference. Overall, panels found today's cultural exchange between the U.S. and the Islamic world problematic at best.

Samer Shehata, professor of Arab studies at Georgetown University, believes that there is currently more State Department-sponsored propaganda aired in the direction of the Islamic, and in this case, Arab world than the BBC. Shehata criticized numerous initiatives by the State Department's Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Office, which he described as "sugar-coated propaganda" aiming to boost the U.S. image abroad. She has recently stepped down after criticizing U.S. health problems. Shehata described U.S.-made media projects, such as "mini documentaries" promoting Arab American life, which he said were based on U.S. commercials as opposed to tools for cultural understanding. According to his data, compiled from Zogby and BBC research, the Arab community generally shares this view. Most of the U.S. projects have proved unpopular.

Arnold Saltzman, a Westchester media company owner who has committed to be extremely popular in the Middle East is Radio Sawa, which specializes in Arabic pop music. Radio Sawa also dedicates a small part of each hour to news—seeing from a distinctly American perspective. Shehata read from a British Broadcasting Company (BBC) interview with young Arab men, all of which said they very much enjoyed the station but were suspicious of its news, often taping to other stations for that portion of the hour. Kleinman countered this argument by challenging the possibility of how to respond to the BBC, and Radio Sawa being competitors in the region.

"We're projecting the spirit of America," Kleinman explained. "Some people look at us and say, 'What does the U.S. really like about the U.S.?'" The format has proved immensely popular, especially among the younger target audience.

Perhaps the most multilateral and cultural exchange came from panelist Faouzi Skali, founder of Morocco's Fez Music Festival. The event, which takes place annually, features sacred music by world-renowned artists from across the globe. After the event, Skali felt compelled to take action against what he saw as a widening void between the Western and Middle Eastern cultures. "Through Western media we have a very false understanding of what Islam is," Skali explained, citing the same problems in Arab media in regards to Western culture. Skali feels that events like these can create understanding of cultures through the appreciation of each other's musi- cans, traditionally representing their own people. "The event says more than you can say to a world that is suspicious of its news, often tuning in other stations for that portion of the hour. Kleinman countered this argument by challenging the possibility of how to respond to the BBC, and Radio Sawa being competitors in the region.

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The Institute of War and Peace Studies, founded by Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1945, was renamed in honor of Arnold Saltzman. "That it will forever carry Arnold's name, his vision of the future of the world, and policies for a peaceful future, this Institute can help move us in that direction," Kleinman said. "If Columbia has a role in helping to prevent another war, that is our responsibility."

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