Dale Eickelmann discussed how communications technologies have improved dramatically, allowing for cultural transmission to be faster, cheaper, and more common. Unfortunately, he said, gains in cultural knowledge have largely been one-sided, which he said contributes to Anti-American sentiment in the Arab world.

Cellular technology, the internet, and improvements in travel options make it easier for people to interact with other cultures, making them less reliant on the media for information about other countries. It also means that it is not possible for governments to send a message only to their domestic population: the whole world can hear it.

Unfortunately, said Eickelmann, the United States has frequently does not hear messages from abroad. Unlike people in the Middle East, who are frequently multi-lingual, highly educated, and are surrounded by aspects of U.S. culture, Americans are generally insulated from messages from abroad and suffer a lack understanding about other cultures, especially Arab culture.

Eickelmann said that the Bin Laden recruitment tapes illustrate how effectively Al Qaeda could mobilize disenfranchised Arab youth against the United States by using messages that speak to them through a highly-produced, images from the American media. He said Americans are often ill-equipped to counter such message because of a lack of understanding about Arab culture.

He called for increased contacts between Middle Eastern Arabs and Americans, through programs like the Peace Corps, teaching exchanges, or exchanges for business. He said many in the Arab world are anxious to learn English, and there is a lot of respect for American education, and taking advantage of this interest is a good way to expose Arabs to American culture and increase awareness of Arab culture among Americans as well.

Jillian Schwedler’s research focuses primarily on Jordan, which she said is currently experiencing widespread protest of American culture that falls along economic lines, not just cultural or religious divisions.

She said that young people in the wealthy “Pro-Western Elite” have embraced several visible aspects of American culture, much to the dismay of more traditional or less wealthy Jordanians, including revealing dress, watching violent movies at theatres, and reading magazines that have ads for alcoholic beverages and society pages. These are utterly unprecedented in Jordanian society.

Schwedler said that images of American society are often used in protests, which she said are quite common in that country. Although protests typically target very specific grievances, such as secularism, foreign policy, conspicuous consumption, or others, Jordanians use American symbolism because it is powerful and widely recognized, not necessarily because they are protesting the people of the United States or American businesses, for example. Jordanians understand this and do not conflate culture and
people, but their protests are often interpreted as Anti-American simply because they use highly visible symbols of Western culture. She blames this for the belief that Anti-Americanism in Jordan is rampant.

Richard Herrmann said there is little understanding of what Middle Eastern Arabs think about the United States. There has been a focus on the extreme viewpoint, such as Al Qaeda, but little done on how the “average Arab” thinks.

Herrmann’s research indicated a widespread thinking that the United States wants to exploit Arab nations and take their resources. There is a view that Washington is Israel’s puppet and interested in promoting a pro-Israeli agenda in dominating the Middle East.