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'Mutual Interest and Mutual Respect': Ideas for U.S. Public Diplomacy toward the 'Muslim World'

by [Robert Satloff](#)

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James Glassman, Marc Lynch, and Robert Satloff addressed The Washington Institute's 2009 Soref Symposium to discuss challenges for U.S. public diplomacy efforts, and offer suggestions for the Obama administration as it attempts to improve America's image in the Middle East and beyond.

James Glassman, president of the World Growth Institute, served as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs from 2008 until earlier this year. Marc Lynch is an associate professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University, where he serves as cochair of the Institute for Public Diplomacy and Global Communication. Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute and host of Dakhil Washington (Inside Washington), a weekly public affairs program on the al-Hurra Arabic satellite television network.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

James Glassman

Successful public diplomacy requires three elements: defined interests, assigned structure and roles, and effective means of communication. These elements aligned at the end of the Bush administration, and the Obama administration should draw on that experience and take advantage of the positive momentum. Time is of the essence.

As the new administration pursues "mutual interests," the first step will be to clearly define them. Engaging and influencing foreign publics is a means, not an end -- it must be employed for a strategic purpose. During the Bush administration, the national security strategy established the dual goals of reducing the threat posed by violent

extremism and promoting freedom around the world. Those interests focused the machinery of public diplomacy on undermining extremist ideology and diverting youths from the path of violence. Other nations shared, and continue to support, these aims.

Second, public diplomacy is a government-wide effort that requires delineated roles for the major stakeholders. With strong leadership operating effectively through a streamlined interagency process in late 2008, the State and Defense Departments were ultimately able to coordinate their work despite the vast resource imbalance between them. This structure has been undermined by transitional gaps in two key positions: the lengthy vacancy of the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, and the elimination of the deputy assistant secretary of defense for supporting public diplomacy. To make the most of public diplomacy, the Obama administration will have to reinstitute a clear structure and take action on the unbalanced allocation of resources.

Third, the means of communication must change. The "big megaphone" strategy of public diplomacy -- explaining U.S. policies and extolling American virtues through speeches and press releases -- consumes too much of our time and resources. Perhaps more important, it is an inefficient and even condescending approach; after long bombardment by government-funded images and stories, audiences have become skeptical of such messages. In other words, they are tired of hearing about us from us. Engagement with foreign publics should be about their concerns and issues, not our image.

Instead of the big megaphone, public diplomacy should turn toward the "Grand Conversation" model, with the U.S. government generating engagement through social-networking technology and public-private partnerships. Last year, for example, the Office of the Undersecretary of State launched a number of programs expressing U.S. interests indirectly, including a "Democracy Is ..." competition on YouTube and a social-networking website for educational exchanges in the ".gov" domain. Keeping its government fingerprint light, the office catalyzed other efforts as well, including a "Problems of Extremism" publication directed by European scholars and a global antiviolenence nonprofit called the Alliance of Youth Movements. Allowing others to take control of the message is risky, but it shows confidence that our values and policies will ultimately win in the marketplace of ideas.

Overall, this model projects an attitude of mutual respect toward its audience, making it ideal for the Obama administration's public diplomacy orientation. In order to win this battle of ideas, however, we have to get in the game. Each day of inactivity concedes space to the competing message of extremism, reversing the valuable advances made at the end of President Bush's term.

Marc Lynch

The "war of ideas" model of public diplomacy was appropriate for tackling al-Qaeda's ideology in the post-September 11 era, but it is inadequate in the face of America's new challenge: a heterogeneous, popular, political resistance camp. Lumping our adversaries together -- whether under the banner of al-Qaeda or "violent extremism" -- simply plays into their hands, making them larger and more powerful than they really are. Instead, the United States should disaggregate the elements of this resistance, address their particular grievances, and try, where possible, to marginalize the truly irreconcilable violent elements.

At its post-September 11 height, al-Qaeda co-opted the anger and frustrations of a broad resistance, successfully claiming the mantle of opposition to the West. Yet, information campaigns and the gradual exposure of the organization's tactics have since demonstrated al-Qaeda's marginality and untenable position. Internal adversaries capitalized on this shift, isolating the group within its supportive communities.

Although al-Qaeda remains capable of serious harm, it is a shadow of its former self that produces more and more propaganda for a dwindling audience. Accordingly, it should no longer be used to define America's official or public diplomacy efforts. President Obama aptly expressed this sentiment in his April speech to the Turkish parliament,

stating that America's relationship with the Muslim world "cannot and will not" be based on opposition to terrorism alone.

Of course, this shift in focus by no means signals the end of hostility and opposition to American foreign policy. Following al-Qaeda's marginalization, the resistance mantle passed to a more broadly constituted rejectionist camp. Despite the conceptual popularity of placing Iran at its head, this camp is actually grounded in mass attitudes -- specifically, mainstream public opposition to American hegemony, Israel, and U.S. foreign policy. Its composition and political motivation differentiate it from violent extremism; unlike religious zealots, this public base cannot be marginalized.

Responding to this challenge will require new tools and a new orientation for public diplomacy. Speaking in terms of a monolithic Islamist enemy only legitimizes the "West vs. resistance" dichotomy, enhances the opposition's appeal, and disguises the variety of political motives masquerading under one conceptual banner. Instead, the Obama administration should separate the reconcilable elements from the truly radical margin, then address the former's interests at the local level. This strategy was successful in Iraq and can serve as a model for the wider encounter with extremism.

The new administration has already adopted this mindset to a great extent. Its outreach to Syria and Iran and its rhetorical gestures toward the Muslim world are pointed efforts to reframe the problem, search for new alliances, and undermine the rejectionist appeal. But these signals are not enough. The administration must reach out and engage in political arguments with mass publics, embracing the new media environment of competing and cacophonous messages using more than just the president and secretary of state's voices.

Robert Satloff

In today's world, public diplomacy is more than straightforward engagement with foreign publics and advocacy for U.S. interests. It is an ideological contest against Islamist extremists, who seek the imposition of sharia-based government on their societies and, eventually, on the rest of the world. Defeating these elements is as consequential for national security as the more kinetic wars we face in Iraq and Afghanistan, and it will require all of the noncoercive instruments of national power.

Combating al-Qaeda is only part of this struggle, which takes place in villages and cities around the world -- anywhere that mainstream voices confront the ideology of violence and extremism. In Morocco, for example, parents fight the spread of radical schools that employ the most modern equipment and facilities in teaching a toxic ideology. These parents are our allies in the battle of ideas, and their voices need support. The United States must bolster their competing narratives and ensure that Muslims have choices. If extremism becomes the only option, then we will have lost.

Unfortunately, our public diplomacy machinery remains largely fixated on improving foreign perceptions of U.S. policy, still pursuing the question "Why do they hate us?" This focus on attitudes rather than behavior is deeply flawed, relying on suspect public polling that divorces opinions from their political meaning. It also abandons the nation state as the unit of analysis, playing into our adversaries' framing of a unified "Muslim world." The Obama administration should jettison this counterproductive phrase and move away from its attitude-focused, poll-dependent approach to foreign policy.

To reorient public diplomacy toward the battle of ideas, the United States must design country-specific plans that engage and empower those who oppose extremism. These plans should be tailored to five categories: war zones (Iraq and Afghanistan), fragile countries (e.g., Yemen, Nigeria, Pakistan), critical countries (e.g., Turkey, Egypt, Indonesia), a systemic region (Europe), and, in its own category, Iran. Washington will need to be nimble and discerning in addressing the unique challenges of these categories. In each case, the United States will have to identify the broad

range of Muslims, pious and secular, who oppose extremism and Islamist governance. We must define anti-Islamist partners in a broad sense, applying the same principle that the British government recently adopted -- namely, that it is a mistake to rely on nonviolent extremists to drown out the voices of violent extremists. Instead, we must work against extremists of all stripes. Similarly, we need to differentiate between governments that will work with us and governments that believe working with the Islamists better serves their interests.

Successful public diplomacy requires ingenuity, boldness, and an entrepreneurial spirit. President Obama's personal engagement in this effort is a positive step, as is his outreach to Muslim and Arab audiences on the basis of "mutual interest and mutual respect." Yet, the administration's persistent rhetoric about "the Muslim world" and inaction on empowering bureaucratic champions for the battle of ideas sends a conflicting signal. Moving forward, the administration must ensure that all government institutions have the leadership and vision they need to win this most important contest. ❖



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