Obama's Personal 'Public Diplomacy': A Very Preliminary Assessment

by Robert Satloff **(/experts/robert-satloff)**

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Brief Analysis

In his first week in office, President Obama spent the lion's share of his time on domestic economic issues, but international concerns -- specifically Arab, Muslim, and Middle East -- were an important focus as well. Collectively, the new president's actions and words constitute an unusually high-profile and personalized "public diplomacy" campaign to correct what he perceives as a serious strategic problem for the United States: a souring of the relationship between Washington and "the Muslim world."

What's New

Much of the president's message echoes comments made by his predecessor -- statements that differentiate the religion of Islam from terrorists who act in its name, statements that refuse to apologize for the American way of life, or statements that celebrate the diversity of American society. President Obama's message, however, sounds different and, at times, more credible coming as it does from a leader who can proudly state -- as he did in his interview with the al-Arabiya satellite television channel -- that "I have Muslim members of my family. I have lived in Muslim countries." Other aspects of the president's rhetorical outreach are new and deserve closer inspection; these include the following key shifts:

- From "us/them" to mutuality. Perhaps the most significant message in Obama's rhetoric is a subtle paradigm shift from the question of whether post-September 11 global political divisions stemmed from problems with U.S. policy or from pathologies in Arab and Muslims societies (the "why do they hate us?" debate) to a new framework that emphasizes commonality of interest. Indeed, one of the most memorable phrases from Obama's inaugural address -- and the phrase that he repeated verbatim in his al-Arabiya interview -- was "To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect." The dual emphasis -- interests and respect -- is a powerful combination and suggests a policy approach borne of realism, not romance.
- From politics to economics. If the "freedom agenda" characterized the Bush administration's attitude toward Arab and Muslim societies, the Obama administration's approach could be called the "prosperity agenda." Obama's inaugural address included no mention of either "democracy" or "human rights" but instead emphasized America's commitment to assist people in need. ("To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work

alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow; to nourish starved bodies and feed hungry minds.") In terms of public diplomacy, this perhaps presages a long-overdue emphasis on the practical side of American support to development in Arab and Muslim countries, such as the billions of dollars in annual U.S. aid, trade, and investment or the many programs in education, science, and other areas in which the U.S. government works closely with Arab and Muslim counterparts. At the same time, however, Obama spoke directly to autocrats and leaders about the stark choices they face. ("To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history; but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.") So far, however, he has neither suggested that there are practical consequences in terms of relations with the United States should those leaders fail to reform nor has he offered specific words of encouragement or support to the dissidents, human rights campaigners, and political activists actually fighting for change in closed societies.

(In this regard, it would be useful to know more about the president's first phone discussions with a leader like Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak: did the conversation focus solely on Egypt's generally positive role throughout the Gaza conflict and ways to strengthen the ceasefire or did it also include exchanges on the souring of U.S.-Egyptian relations and the muzzling of internal dissent in Egypt? As the past has shown, if the latter issues are not high on the president's agenda, they are never viewed as significant by the foreign leader.)

- Repudiation of past strategy. Interestingly, like his predecessor, Obama has distanced himself from decades of previous U.S. Middle East policy. Whereas George Bush, in his rhetoric to Arabs and Muslims, repudiated sixty years of policy that emphasized stability at the expense of democracy, Obama has distanced himself from a generation of U.S. policy in which, by his account, America lacked sufficient respect for Arabs and Muslims. As he said in his al-Arabiya interview, "The same respect and partnership that America had with the Muslim world as recently as twenty or thirty years ago, there's no reason why we can't restore that. And that I think is going to be an important task." This passage is difficult to understand.

  Over the past three decades, the United States has fought multiple wars to protect Muslims from aggression or genocide (for example, Kuwait and Bosnia) and has suffered the death of hundreds of military personnel at the hands of terrorists on Muslim soil (from Beirut to Mogadishu to Khobar Towers). In addition, it is similarly difficult to argue that U.S.-Muslim relations enjoyed their halcyon days during the era of the Arab oil embargo, hijacking of American aircraft, and kidnapping, assassination, and attacks on U.S. diplomats in countries such as Iran, Sudan, Libya, and Pakistan. The conventional reference point for the high-water mark of U.S.-Arab relations is forty-five to fifty-five years ago, during the Eisenhower and Kennedy administrations (for example, Eisenhower's position on Suez; Kennedy's on Arab nationalism). And it is arguable, to say the least, as to whether those presidents offered models of behavior on Middle East issues worth emulating. Specifically, it would be interesting to learn more from the Obama team about precisely what the president means when he cites this dividing line in U.S.-Muslim relations as being twenty to thirty years ago.

- A Muslim world? While Obama's early comments have projected a healthy sense of realism, balance, and defense of U.S. interests and values, one oft-repeated phrase has the unintended consequence of strengthening the worldview of America's ideological adversaries among radical Islamist extremists: the president's numerous references to "the Muslim world." Eleven times in his al-Arabiya interview -- plus once in his inaugural address -- the president used this phrase. This is a mistake.

  Radical Islamists believe humanity is divided between "the Muslim world" and the non-Muslim world; in their

Manichean worldview, geography and national sovereignty are obstacles to the unity of the Muslim umma. The United States, of course, takes a different view. America exists -- indeed, America thrives -- in a world of nation-states, where the principal division of peoples is based on nationality, not ethnicity, race, or religion. The United States has no interest in suggesting that Muslim citizens of Nigeria, Indonesia, France, and, for that matter, Texas or Michigan, are part of some singular global unit. While Obama's references to "the Muslim world" were surely shorthand for "peoples who live in Muslim-majority countries in Asia and Africa," the repeated use of the phrase has the effect of emboldening our adversaries because it suggests we are competing on their ideological playing field instead of compelling them to compete on ours.

A related theme is Obama's apparent endorsement of some variation of the concept of linkage, that is, the idea that conflicts (and, therefore, solutions to them) in the broader Middle East are connected to each other. While this is certainly accurate on some level -- for example, the resolution of the Iran nuclear problem will have an impact on radical groups that operate in the Arab-Israeli arena -- little evidence suggests, as the president did in the al-Arabiya interview, that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Syria, Iran, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan are all "interrelated." In practical terms, viewing the region this way exaggerates the power of rejectionist states and groups, effectively granting them the power to hold progress hostage to their local abilities, and it forces the United States to play lowest-common-denominator politics throughout the region. It is unclear whether the president meant anything more by his "interrelated" comment other than a general commitment to reach out in friendship to the broad array of Arab and Muslim peoples but, as a policy statement, it certainly needs closer scrutiny.

- Venue and personnel. In addition to the substance of the president's comments, it is noteworthy that he chose to deliver his first televised interview on this topic to al-Arabiya, the Saudi-owned satellite channel that has been a far more responsible journalistic actor in covering Middle East conflict and U.S. policy than its more celebrated competitor al-Jazeera. The president went even further by specifically complimenting Saudi king Abdullah in the interview, praising him for his "great courage" in proposing an Arab-Israeli peace initiative. This praise for the Saudi monarch, the only Muslim leader mentioned by name in the interview, is a fascinating element of continuity from Bush to Obama. (The president did mention Usama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri.)

  It is regrettable, however, that Obama did not deliver his first interview to an Arab audience on al-Hurra, the U.S. government-funded Arabic-language satellite channel. Al-Hurra's comparative advantage in the Arab television market should be that it is the "must-see" station to learn about U.S. politics, policy, society, and culture; this status can only be achieved if the president, the White House, and the administration writ large acts in partnership with this mission. U.S. taxpayers deserve full cooperation between various arms of government in contributing to al-Hurra's success. Even though the Bush administration did not adequately support al-Hurra in this effort, the station still registered significant gains in viewership over the past two years, as evidenced by both independent observers and results from television ratings firms. It would be sad if the al-Arabiya interview signals similar disinterest in al-Hurra's success on the part of the new administration. (Whether viewership is a good measure of al-Hurra's success in achieving its mission is a separate issue.)

Lastly, as important as the president's early comments have been in setting a new tone and style to America's engagement with Arab and Muslim peoples, these statements need to be supported by officials who can translate them into policy. In relations with Arabs and Muslims -- and specifically vis-a-vis the contest against radical Islamist extremism -- this means the undersecretary of state for public diplomacy, who is, by statute, effectively the U.S. government's "commander-in-chief" in the battle of ideas. So far, no person has been named to fill this position,

which carries national security responsibilities far beyond those of most third-ranking officials in the State Department. Leaving this position without a seasoned professional committed to helping mainstream Muslims compete with and defeat radical extremists would be as derelict as leaving Iraq and Afghanistan without a combatant commander. It needs to be filled immediately.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, author of **The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=65)** (2004) and host of Dakhil Washington, a public affairs talk show on al-Hurra satellite television. His comments do not necessarily reflect those of al-Hurra. ❖

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