

Speed Trap

Jul 27, 2005



Articles & Testimony

In her Senate nominating testimony last week, [Undersecretary of State-designate for public diplomacy Karen Hughes \(templateC06.php?CID=802\)](#) characterized America's challenge to win allies and understanding around the globe as a "struggle of ideas." Here's a story of what happened when one bright idea -- ahem, my bright idea -- offered as a modest proposal to help fight the post-9/11 hearts-and-minds battle in the Middle East ran up against a truly formidable adversary: the federal bureaucracy.

Eighteen months ago, a student in my son's first-grade class walked to the front of the stage of his school's auditorium and introduced a song during a winter holiday concert. Every parent knows the scene. It happens each December, in literally thousands of cities and towns. But this concert was different. The student was named Ahmed. The school was in Rabat, Morocco. The song he introduced was "Dreidel, Dreidel."

That's when it hit me. The Rabat American School was more than just a fine educational facility. It was a secret weapon in the ideological battle raging across Arab and Muslim societies. Mixed in with lessons about caterpillars, asteroids, and Abraham Lincoln were the three ingredients that distinguish American-style education at its best: tolerance, curiosity, and critical thinking. And the best part was that so many of the beneficiaries of this uniquely American educational mix were not Americans. Indeed, Americans constituted only about one-third of the school's student body, with the balance divided between Moroccans and third-country nationals living in Rabat, Morocco's capital.

There are about 185 American schools spread over 132 countries, accredited by American educational associations and certified by the U.S. government. Most are nonprofit, nondenominational, coeducational institutions founded by overseas communities of American citizens and usually owned and operated by local parents associations. Of the nearly 100,000 students enrolled in such schools around the world, more than 70 percent are not American.

Someone in Washington, I thought, had figured out that investing in American schools abroad was a smart move. After all, with embassies barricaded behind fortress walls and cultural centers shuttered on every continent, these schools were among the last physical structures of Americana that still put out a welcome mat to local people. Alas, I was wrong. When I checked in late 2003, the U.S. government, through the State Department's Office of Overseas Schools, provided only about \$8 million per year in total to these schools. This pittance amounted to less than 2 percent of the schools' combined \$450 million operating budget. Even with the inclusion of non-cash support, like tariff-free imports and corporate donations, the value of outside assistance was still shockingly small.

In an [op-ed that appeared in the International Herald Tribune \(templateC06.php?CID=673\)](#) just before Christmas, 2003, I proposed the creation of U.S.-funded scholarships specifically targeted at low- and middle-income children to attend one of the about 50 schools in Arab and Muslim countries. For less than \$14 million, I figured, ten percent more local kids could reap the benefits of this English-language, American-style education. The publicity value alone of offering these merit-based scholarships would be worth the cost. Furthermore, school-age kids are usually accompanied to school events -- like holiday concerts -- by their families, which in Arab and Muslim societies are bigger and more extended than the U.S. norm. So, for the price of one child, the whole family would be exposed to the

best of American values as an added bonus.

The op-ed made its way to two thoughtful congressmen: Joseph Knollenberg, Republican of Michigan, and Howard Berman, Democrat of California. This was at a time, one should recall, when Congress was awash in plans to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to help America win the ideological war in the Middle East, from funding new satellite television and radio stations to promoting the study of Arabic and Islam at American universities. All of those plans had powerful domestic constituencies. Mine, in contrast, would win neither congressman a single vote, let alone a campaign contribution. Nevertheless, Knollenberg and Berman thought enough of the idea to draft and propose legislation to establish a scaled-down version. The American Schools Abroad Support Act of 2004, also known as HR 4303, was born.

At first, the legislative process was smooth sailing. HR 4303 won unanimous approval of the House International Relations Committee, and language asking the State Department to provide a funding plan to implement the legislation was included in the 2004 Foreign Operations bill. Then, the idea won a boost when Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Margaret Tutwiler endorsed the concept in high-profile congressional testimony. Ultimately, a version of the original bill was incorporated into the massive Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act, which became law last year.

Both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue were seemingly on board. The next step was to receive the proposed funding plan from the State Department. Alas, nothing arrived. The State Department simply refused to respond to Congress's request. Letters to Foggy Bottom officials, including then-Secretary of State Colin Powell, elicited either anodyne responses or none at all.

So I did some snooping around. What I found out would have made Joseph Heller smile. Start with the new Middle East Partnership Initiative, a promising, innovative program designed to seed reform efforts throughout the region. MEPI, as it is called, would be a logical source of funds for education programs aiding Arab and Muslim children. But, MEPI's view was: We don't do scholarships. Send it to the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.

That bureau, known as ECA, sits in the undersecretariat for public diplomacy, also a logical source of funds for a program designed to reach out to Arab and Muslim parents by underscoring America's generosity. But ECA's view turned out to be as follows: We do scholarships for foreigners to come to America and for Americans to go abroad, but not for foreigners to stay abroad. We would have to create a whole new bureaucracy to oversee that. Send it to the Office of Overseas Schools.

That office, which sits in the Bureau of Management, is the administrative liaison between the U.S. government and American schools abroad and supervises the disbursement of such modest funds as Washington already sends to those schools. It too would be a logical place to house the scholarship program, which is what the Congressional sponsors originally intended. But I was reliably told that OOS's view was along the lines of: We in the Bureau of Management have always rejected efforts by Congress to tell us how to spend money related to internal management and administration -- a category that includes overseas schools -- and we aren't going to bend on this one. If Congress wants it so much, have them send it either to the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs or the new Middle East Partnership Initiative.

And so, to this day, State has still not officially uttered a word on the issue. With the arrival of Dina Powell and, before long, her boss-to-be Karen Hughes to run public diplomacy at State, maybe my simple idea -- scholarships to American schools abroad for Arab and Muslim kids -- will get a new lease on life. It may not be fair but this is my own personal litmus test of how serious and empowered the new team will be.

Both Hughes and Powell have reputations for being smart, savvy professionals; but neither has ever worked in the State bureaucracy, where purse-strings are power and turf is holy ground. To be sure, officials in each one of State's

alphabet soup of offices -- ECA, OOS, MEPI -- are caring, committed professionals, forced to make solomonic decisions about lots of worthy projects with limited funds. But Hughes and Powell have a special responsibility to see the big picture and to connect the many little dots that will make it come to life -- in other words, to break through the bureaucratic brick-wall that is hampering our efforts to win hearts and minds in the Middle East. Hughes is right that the war on terrorism is a "struggle of ideas." It would be nice if implementing ideas to fight that battle weren't such a struggle.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

New Republic Online

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](#)

TOPICS

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)