

How to Win the Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror

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Brief Analysis

On November 10, 2004, Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute, and Fouad Ajami, director of the Middle East Studies Program at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, addressed a Special Policy Forum luncheon on the occasion of the release of Dr. Satloff's new Institute monograph, [The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror: Essays on U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Middle East. \(templateC04.php?CID=65\)](#) The following is a summary of Dr. Satloff's remarks; also included is a list of policy principles handed out to forum attendees. [Read an edited transcript \(templateC07.php?CID=151\)](#) of Dr. Ajami's and Dr. Satloff's remarks.

President George W. Bush will enter his second term leading a country that is at war on five fronts at once. Four are clear: in Iraq and Afghanistan, against al-Qaeda and its global affiliates, and within the homeland. The fifth front, however, is the poor stepsister to the other four. It is being fought with an arsenal of outmoded and dysfunctional weaponry, a set of confused and self-defeating battlefield tactics, and no clear strategy for victory. Such is the status of the U.S. effort to fight the "battle of ideas" -- the ideological war to prevent Islamists and their sympathizers from capturing the social, cultural, economic, and political high ground in Muslim societies around the world.

Public diplomacy should, in the best of circumstances, focus on three objectives: sharpening America's image; investing in identifying, nurturing, and supporting allies; and promoting U.S. interests. In the post-September 11 era, the critical new element is the ideological battle against Islamism.

Those who dismiss this as a public relations challenge and not a potentially cataclysmic life-and-death struggle are wrong; it is far more akin to the choice between communist and free during the Cold War. While this is principally a fight being waged by Muslims against Muslims, within each society, the United States cannot avoid its role as a central player. This is a series of national struggles within a global context, and a string of individual national defeats could spell a catastrophe for U.S. interests and ruin for America's friends on three continents.

Despite all this, the battle of ideas suffers from the weakest bureaucratic champions, the least resources, and the fewest headlines. Repairing U.S. policy should be a top priority for Bush's second term. The key lies in recognizing the urgency of the ideological challenge; understanding the importance of winning this fight as prerequisite to systemic political and social changes in Muslim countries; and committing the human, material, and political resources needed to achieve victory.

In this campaign, there is reason to be more confident today than at any other time since September 11. Not only do important parts of the Washington policymaking community appear to recognize the urgency of action, but Europeans increasingly also seem to understand the threat (e.g., witness the tough anti-Islamist measures in France and the backlash to Islamist-related violence in the Netherlands). Perhaps most important, moderate, anti-Islamist Arabs and Muslims are beginning to step forward in courageous ways, exemplified by the 2,500 individuals who have already signed their names to an internet petition calling for the indictment of Muslim clerics who issues fatwas legitimizing terrorism.

From Ideas to Policy

President Bush has performed a vital service by drawing the link between the failures of Arab and Muslim societies and their impact on U.S. and Western interests. But while the administration's declaratory flourishes have been important for energizing anti-Islamist Muslims and putting Middle Eastern autocrats on notice about the potential for changed U.S. priorities, they also mask an intellectual fuzziness about the strategic objectives of U.S. policy.

This lack of strategic priorities has often produced ideas that are noble in intent but counterproductive in practice. Such, for example, is the case with many of the U.S.-funded programs designed to promote "institution building" in Muslim societies. These are, logically enough, designed to strengthen such worthy icons of a liberal society as parliaments and political parties, as well as basic liberties such as the right to free speech, press, and assembly. But focusing on the abstraction of the institution rather than on the people who occupy that institution can lead to the absurd situation of U.S. funding of Islamist radicals -- Islamist parliamentarians, Islamist educators, Islamist editors, and so forth. In other words, our outreach to Muslim societies should not be so fixated on form that it is blind to content.

The lack of strategy is complemented by a lack of urgency. In terms of political and financial resources, the battle of ideas receives little attention and not enough money. For example, after September 11, the White House established a Strategic Communication Policy Coordinating Committee. After the invasion of Iraq, however, this committee did not meet for sixteen months -- from March 2003 until July 2004, when it was replaced by a new entity, the Muslim World Outreach Coordinating Committee. Moreover, spending on public diplomacy in real dollars has actually decreased since September 11 (apart from international broadcasting, which won additional assistance despite being the arm of public diplomacy least able to achieve a long-term impact). Indeed, the total so far allocated to the promising Middle East Partnership Initiative is just 7 percent of annual U.S. assistance to Egypt.

A New Approach

Fixing these problems will require top-to-bottom overhaul of the government's public diplomacy apparatus. Although there are obvious differences, the battle of ideas should be viewed more like a military front and less like one of many diplomatic initiatives. It is the president's responsibility, through his national security advisor, to ensure that strategies and tactics are clearly defined; that lines of authority are streamlined throughout departments, bureaus, and agencies; and that sufficient resources are provided to enable our diplomat-soldiers in the field to do their jobs.

Optimally, a new federal agency would take responsibility for all U.S. government efforts at public diplomacy, democracy promotion, postconflict reconstruction, nation-building, and related tasks. Although it is possible to house all of these efforts within the State Department, such a move would be difficult -- under this or any other administration -- because of State's primary mandate of managing and developing relations with states and governments. Given the urgency of the current situation, establishing a White House office to provide strategic direction and impose disciplined coordination on the many arms of government that have a role to play in the ideological campaign in the war on terror is a second-best alternative.

Operationally, the United States should attempt to do fewer things, and do them better, in its outreach abroad. This involves targeting resources more narrowly, with strategic objectives clearly in mind. For example, Washington should consider making educational reform -- curricular reform, teacher and media training, schoolbook provision, new scholarships, English-language initiatives, and so on -- the central focus of all U.S. development efforts in Muslim societies, leaving many traditional development areas (health, clean water, etc.) to other donors.

Throughout, U.S. public diplomacy efforts must become more local, entrepreneurial, and aggressive. In every Muslim society, U.S. officials need to actively seek out potential allies and develop future partners, with the freedom to take risks with each. It is far better to gamble on assisting a local partner who claims to share an antipathy to radical Islamists and to fail than to cover our bets through a counterproductive attempt to reach a modus vivendi with the Islamists themselves.

Principles for U.S. Public Diplomacy toward Arabs and Muslims in the Post-September 11 Era (distilled from The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror)

What to Do

1. Public diplomacy is about the three "I"s: image, investment, and interests. Specifically, this entails a short-term focus on sharpening America's image; a long-term investment in identifying, nurturing, and supporting allies; and a consistent emphasis on promoting U.S. interests. Don't fixate on the first at the expense of the other two. 2. In the post-September 11 era, the critical new element in public diplomacy is the ideological battle against Islamism. Fighting Islamism (also called jihadism) is a war, not an initiative -- we should fight by supporting our friends, isolating our critics, and punishing our adversaries. 3. Defeating Islamism requires building a broad coalition of states, groups, and individuals of various motivations, ideologies, and political persuasions. Be ready to "agree to disagree" on aspects of U.S. policy (e.g., Arab-Israel issues, Iraq) for the greater good. To build an anti-Islamist alliance, reach out to Muslims of all stripes -- pious, lapsed, and secular. 4. Employ asymmetric warfare in the public diplomacy battle against the Islamists. Find and exploit points of weakness and moments of opportunity; be entrepreneurial. Taking a page from the Islamists' own strategy, offer Muslims alternative models of anti-Islamist excellence. 5. Compete for the minds of young Muslims; get into the fight. Invest in education, especially English-language education. Bring institutional, human, and economic development work in Arab and Muslim societies in line with U.S. strategic objectives.

What Not to Do

1. Don't use the terms "Arab world" and "Muslim world," which should be banished from the official lexicon; be as country-specific as possible in both word and deed. The United States should operate in the world of sovereign states; jihadists benefit when the context is supranational (e.g., dar al-Islam pitted against dar al-harb). 2. Don't be condescending or bashful. We should talk to Arabs and Muslims as we would have them talk to us, i.e., maturely, candidly, and openly. Failure to make the case cedes the battlefield to the Islamists. For U.S. information policy, the goal is to level the playing field so Arabs and Muslims can make informed decisions based on accurate information. 3. Don't try to accommodate, co-opt, or "dialogue" with Islamists; they are better at the game than we are and, in the process, we confuse and demoralize our allies. And never tell Muslims how to be "good Muslims" or suggest that America knows what constitutes "true Islam." 4. Don't spend too much time trying to figure out why so many Muslims reportedly "hate us." Although public opinion deserves both analytical and policy attention, we must remember that polls tend to distort and exaggerate; that public opinion is episodic and driven by news cycles, with less operational significance than is commonly believed; and that the war against Islamism is not about "us," it's about "them." 5. Do no harm. This is tougher than it seems. ❖

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