

The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror:

Essays on U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Middle East

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Introduction

Even before the flames raging within the twisted steel of the fallen World Trade Center towers were extinguished, a debate began to flare up regarding the motivations of the perpetrators. How could Arab Muslim society produce young, well-educated men filled with such hatred toward America that they would kill more than 3,000 innocents -- as well as themselves -- to prove a point? Some argued that the killers were representative of a strain of Muslim revulsion at "who we are" -- that is, a profound hatred of American values, culture, and society. Others argued that disgust over "what we do" -- U.S. policy regarding Israel, oil, Arab autocrats, and Islam itself -- was the main source of the animus. Advocates of each position had their policy prescriptions readily at hand. The latter argued that we should change our policy to reduce the level of disgust among Arabs and Muslims. The former suggested nothing but staying the course, arguing that military victory alone would alter the calculus of hatred. This collection of essays owes its origin to my dissatisfaction with both sets of recommendations for U.S. policy.

A relatively small but still sizable, intensely ambitious, and disproportionately powerful subgroup of Muslims do indeed hate "who we are." For the most part, these are Islamists -- Muslims who reject modern notions of state, citizen, and individual rights and instead seek to impose a totalitarian version of Islam on peoples and nations around the globe. Within this subgroup are those who seek power through revolutionary or violent means and others who seek it through evolutionary or nonviolent means. While the former are unabashed terrorists, it is equally true that the latter can never be democrats.

There are also many Muslims who, while not Islamists, are genuinely angered by certain U.S. policies abroad. U.S. policy analysts would be doing their country a disservice by not recognizing this fact. While the outrage expressed by these Muslims may be episodic and almost surely lacks the operational significance often ascribed to it, it is nonetheless real and cannot merely be wished away by changing the topic.

And, lest we forget, there is a large percentage of Muslims whose daily lives are not animated by any of these issues. These are the tens of millions whose energies are completely sapped by the uphill struggle to eke out a living. They might have some passing knowledge of goings-on in faraway Baghdad or Gaza and may, if asked, express an opinion

on them. But their interests and concerns are consumed by more urgent demands.

Regarding the various stripes of Islamists, the United States can do nothing to soften their hearts or change their minds. The goal of U.S. policy should instead be to seek their defeat -- through military means for those who use violence to gain power, and through political means for those whose tactics take a more circuitous path to the same objective. There is no benefit to be gained from targeting public diplomacy toward the Islamists.

Regarding other Muslims who actively critique U.S. policy, there is much the United States can do apart from the obviously self-defeating approach of changing policies to appease the critics. Given the structural biases, shoddy journalism, and intellectual drivel that passes for political discourse in many corners of the Middle East, America's top priority vis-a-vis these Muslims should be to make sure that their opinions are at least based on accurate, dispassionate information. In this regard, public diplomacy can help to create a "level playing field" so that U.S. policies (and the people advocating them) receive a fair hearing in the court of public opinion. Numerous tactical options flow from this strategy.

And regarding the millions of poor and struggling Muslims, the goal of U.S. policy should be to help provide them with the economic, educational, social, and other tools required to leave poverty behind and become constructive and contributing members of their societies. A wide range of policy instruments are available to achieve this goal, complemented by public diplomacy that underscores America's concern and commitment on a personal level.

The story does not end there, however. The key ingredient missing from most analyses of the "why do they hate us?" problem is a recognition that the first two groups of Muslims -- those whose hatred arises from "who we are" and those whose critique is based on "what we do" -- are also battling each other over the fate and direction of their societies. On rare occasions -- Algeria in the 1990s, for example -- this battle has devolved into a shooting war. More commonly, it is a battle of ideas over how to organize societies. The fact that this battle rages in most countries without too many bombs going off or too many dead bodies piling up neither renders it any less momentous nor makes the imperative of victory any less urgent.

The United States has a vital stake in the outcome of this battle, both for the sake of Muslims themselves and for the security of Americans and U.S. interests in Arab and Muslim countries. Without reservation or apology, America's strategy should be to help non- and anti-Islamist Muslims beat back the Islamist challenge. This strategy must be pursued even if many of these putative Muslim allies express bitter dislike for certain aspects of U.S. foreign policy.

In the post-September 11 era, public diplomacy should be focused on fighting the battle of ideas in Muslim societies. This is a battle that can be won, though it will take more time, money, commitment, and ingenuity than the U.S. government has so far been willing to dedicate to the task.

This set of essays discusses the many problems plaguing public diplomacy in the post-September 11 era and proposes how the United States should pursue what many regard as a mission impossible. Collectively, the essays span the three years since September 11. Four of them were written expressly for this collection, while the balance appeared previously in various publications and are reprinted here as originally published.

There are distinct advantages to using this format. A series of brief essays on discrete subtopics, written and developed over time, both makes the subjects discussed more accessible and provides a chronological context to evolving debates over public diplomacy. This approach may mean that some issues appear fresher and seem to merit more detailed discussion than others. Hopefully, that problem is outweighed by the benefits of following the intellectual odyssey that I undertook as I focused on the public diplomacy challenges facing America since September 11.

Seven months after the al-Qaeda attacks in the United States, my family and I moved from Washington to Rabat, Morocco, capital of a populous Arab Muslim country located at a strategic point between the Atlantic and the

Mediterranean, just nine miles from Europe. We lived in Rabat for more than two years, during a time of great challenge and turbulence. We traveled to every corner of the country and met Moroccans from all walks of life. I traveled to many corners of the Middle East as well. My wife and I learned much through our children and their experiences; one of our sons attended an outstanding local Moroccan school, while another attended the Rabat American School, an institution that provides the finest of American-style education to a student body that is overwhelmingly non-American. And, not being American officials ourselves, we were free to explore certain places at certain times when our diplomat friends did not have this license, such as when the entire family drove to downtown Rabat to witness one of the largest anti-Iraq war protests in the Middle East.

My summary assessment -- that the battle of ideas can be won if the United States is willing to commit itself to helping its current and potential Muslim allies "fight the fight" -- emerges in large part from my experience abroad. While this theme is present in several of the early essays in this collection, it is expounded with increasing confidence and buoyancy over time. Without minimizing the daunting obstacles that lie ahead, I am convinced that a public diplomacy infused with hope, optimism, candor, creativity, resources, and an entrepreneurial approach to building and supporting allies is the right strategy for America in the Middle East.

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