Lessons from the Front Line in the Battle for 'Hearts and Minds':

My Two Years in Morocco

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

Aug 2, 2004

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Brief Analysis

Morocco is a nation of nearly 30 million people, part Arab, part Berber, and overwhelmingly Muslim, yet distant enough from Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian arena so that those issues, while relevant, are not all-consuming. Hence, it provides an excellent vantage point from which to assess the ideological battle between radical Islamists, on the one hand, and non- and anti-Islamists on the other.

Like many countries in the region, Morocco has been passing through turbulent times. It is on the front line in the war on terrorism, as evidenced by the May 16, 2003, suicide bombings in Casablanca and many other failed plots that have gone unreported. Wahhabi institutions are widespread, especially in the north, and Moroccans have played key roles in numerous al-Qaeda conspiracies. As elsewhere, however, the daily lives of ordinary Moroccans are not consumed by this overarching reality.

My own case was unusual: in March 2003, nearly halfway through my two-year stay in Morocco, I was the target of a front-page attack in at-Tajdid, the newspaper of the country's radical Islamist movement. This was followed by an attack in the influential leftist newspaper, Le Journal. In a small way, then, I joined the ideological battle facing the larger Moroccan society. This is a real-life battle for the hearts, minds, and pocketbooks of millions of people in dozens of countries: from parents eager to secure the finest possible education for their children only to learn that the schools with the best facilities and highest-paid teachers are privately financed Islamist academies, to small businessmen turned down by banks for loans and forced to turn to Islamist loan sharks, who extract a political price in lieu of interest.

During my first year in Morocco, the Islamists were in ascendance. They had compelled the king, Muhammad VI, to shelve proposals for reform of the family code and had effectively won a nationwide parliamentary election. In May 2003, however, everything changed. The coordinated terrorist attacks in Casablanca -- most of which targeted Jewish sites -- provoked widespread popular revulsion. After three weeks of silence, the regime finally acted; its courageous and assertive new approach was worth the wait. It included strong rhetoric (e.g., condemnations of radical ideas from "the east," a thinly veiled reference to Wahhabism), aggressive security measures (e.g., a new

antiterrorism law), official ostracization of Islamist political parties (who received just 3 percent of the vote in subsequent nationwide municipal elections), ideological countermeasures (e.g., increased control over mosques and vetting of sermons), bold reform measures (e.g., sweeping change of the family code, ending legal discrimination against women), and even increased openness regarding Arab-Israeli matters (e.g., a public welcome for Israel's foreign minister).

Collectively, these initiatives constituted a major change in both substance and style. They were made possible by two factors: leadership and receptivity. First, Morocco had a leader who decided to get serious about the range of problems facing his country. Second, it had a populace that was, by and large, disgusted by terrorist violence and had become willing to accept change.

Morocco has also continued to progress on democratization by enhancing elections, decentralization, and other key processes. Although it is still a country in which the monarch both reigns and rules, it is moving in the right direction. A case in point was the messy but fundamentally healthy political give-and-take between officials in Rabat and elected local representatives regarding disbursal of relief aid following the February 24, 2004, earthquake in al-Hoceima.

At the same time, it is essential to recognize the inherent tension between democratization and the fight against extremism. Democracy promotion and the hearts-and-minds campaign are first cousins, not identical twins. Democratization is about creating rules, institutions, and patterns of behavior in which local people can determine their own future, peacefully, over time. The battle for hearts and minds is about empowering local people to defeat the creeping totalitarianism of radical Islamists. Without victory in the latter struggle, the former stands no chance.

To win this battle, the U.S. government needs to reconsider the nature of the problem. As the 9-11 Commission argued, the problem is not terrorism, it is the ideology from which terrorists spring, i.e., radical Islamism. The appropriate strategic response is for the United States to be firm and clear in its values. Tactically, Washington needs to use every arrow in its quiver, from diplomacy (both public and traditional) to military power.

The United States must also rethink its understanding of the protagonists in this struggle. What, for example, is a "Moroccan"? Many are Arabs, but at least half are Berber. Many speak Arabic as their first language, but many others do not. This demographic kaleidoscope is actually the norm in what is erroneously called "the Arab world," many parts of which are home to large percentages of non-Arabs and non-Sunnis. Translating this reality into rhetoric and policy is essential.

Moreover, this reality reaches beyond demographics to politics. In Morocco, for example, most Arabic speakers plead not to be lumped in with Arabs from mashrek, or the "east" -- i.e., those Arabs who are hung up on Israel, seduced by Wahhabism, or party to other crazy ideologies like Ba'athism. This is not to suggest that Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are not important and emotive issues in Morocco. Their urgency and relevance waxes and wanes with time, however. Sentiments expressed by Moroccans (and others) on these issues, while real, should not be exaggerated. Assessing the operational relevance of these sentiments is key.

In this regard, public opinion polls that suggest near-universal hatred of the United States in the Arab and Muslim worlds must be viewed with extreme caution. Not only is the methodology sometimes faulty, but positive responses to questions about the United States are rarely highlighted, while negative responses are underscored. For example, the Pew Global Attitudes Project's March 2004 report was titled A Year After the Gulf War: Mistrust of America in Europe Ever Higher, Muslim Anger Persists. Yet, one would search the report in vain for any polling question that actually asked Muslims about levels of anti-U.S. "anger."

The spread of radical Islamism, not U.S. unpopularity, is the most serious challenge to U.S. interests in many Arab and Muslim societies. The solution -- as frequently expressed by liberal Moroccans -- cannot be found in reaching an

accommodation with the Islamists. Such a policy sends a doubly bad message. First, it tells the Islamists that they are powerful enough to goad Washington into overlooking their rejection of virtually every American value in order to build a relationship with them. Second, it tells non- and anti-Islamists that they are not important enough to merit America's attention. Specifically, anti-Islamist Moroccans complain that Washington sends the wrong message when it provides parliamentary training funds that are used by Islamist legislators to become more effective critics of the government; when it pays to send Islamists to the inaugural Congress of Muslim Democrats, giving them a U.S. stamp of approval; and when, as reported in the Moroccan press, it advises the regime against banning the legal Islamist party, the Party of Justice and Development, following the May 2003 bombings.

Based on my experience in Morocco, U.S. public diplomacy needs to focus on three key areas: image, interests, and investments. Regarding the first element, America's image matters, and there are many steps -- often commonsensical -- that could be taken to improve it (e.g., having diplomats speak local languages). But image is about the present; Washington needs to think much more about the future. Hence, focusing on interests and investments is essential.

In advancing its interests, the U.S. government should begin by taking Arabs and Muslims more seriously. In particular, Washington must abandon its longstanding reluctance to talk directly to Arab and Muslim audiences about difficult issues such as terrorism, radical Islamism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and Iraq.

Unfortunately, the most important element in U.S. public diplomacy -- the need to invest in both current allies and the potential for future ones -- is the least valued. This effort should have three components:

• Identify allies. Unlike Islamists, non- and anti-Islamist Muslims are defined more by who they are not rather than by who they are. They range across political tendencies and include all types of Muslims, from radical atheists to lapsed Muslims to pious believers. The U.S. role should be to identify potential allies among these individuals and build networks of common purpose among them. Just as the United States forged an anti-Nazi alliance with communists during World War II, the anti-Islamist effort may involve bringing together people of very different worldviews to work collectively toward the larger cause. Washington also needs to show these individuals that it is willing to support them in the currency that matters, i.e., visibility and money. Contrary to popular opinion, the imprimatur of the United States remains sorely coveted, especially in terms of money. As virtually all U.S. Agency for International Development or embassy officials report across the Middle East, very few local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have actually rejected offers of U.S. financial aid in protest of U.S. policy.

• Empower allies. The U.S. government needs to strengthen its local anti-Islamist allies. One important means of doing so is to provide them with the information necessary to fight the Islamists. For example, anti-Islamists share a growing alarm at the spread of Islamist social-welfare activities, some of which are linked to terrorist front groups. Many civic activists, including journalists, would take up the cudgel against these groups, especially if they knew about their possible terrorist connections. They lack such information, however, even though much of it is available in the public record in the United States. One solution would be the creation of an internet-based information clearinghouse in Arabic and other local languages, outlining the operations, management, financing, and personnel of all Islamist-oriented initiatives and NGOs and the linkages between them.

• Nurture future allies. The United States needs to invest time, effort, and money in developing new and future allies. For Islamists, education -- especially children's education -- is the prime battleground. So far, the United States is barely even putting up a fight.

Promoting English-language education should be America's top priority. While knowing English does not necessarily translate into liberal thought or pro-American sentiment, English is a portal to both Anglo-American culture and the internet-based information revolution. Knowing English at least gives someone the opportunity to

learn about the United States and make judgments about its policies and values without the filter of translation or reliance on sources of information that may present a skewed image of reality. Specific initiatives that could be pursued include:

• Creating "English-for-all" after-school programs throughout the Muslim world at no or nominal cost to parents. This could be pursued cooperatively with existing NGOs and the governments of other English-speaking countries. Few steps could earn the United States more goodwill in Muslim countries than investing enough money to make English-language study free or very low in cost.

• Supporting the development of U.S.-style, English-language universities, with the goal of having at least one fully-accredited English-language university in every country in the Middle East.

• Expanding the paltry financial support for American schools abroad to provide American-style educational opportunities for school-age children. In an age when embassies are fortresses, American schools (and the Peace Corps) are the only open and welcoming institutions of Americana left in many countries. They deserve more help. One idea, born of my own family's experience, is the American School Abroad Support Act (HR 4303), which would provide full or partial merit-based scholarships for lower- and middle-class Arab and Muslim children to attend certified American schools overseas.

The bottom line is, the United States need not be defeatist. There are millions of Muslims who are not only willing to fight against radical Islamists, but are already engaged in fighting them on a daily basis in their own communities. The United States needs to make common cause with these brave individuals, providing support so that they can fight their battle more effectively. Their battle is America's -- and their victory will be America's victory, too.

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