Unforced Error

by Jonathan Schanzer **(/experts/jonathan-schanzer)**

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At the heart of this sleepy South American capital of Suriname stand four golden minarets of the Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam mosque. Next to the mosque stands a stately wooden synagogue representing one of South America's oldest Jewish communities, which came to this former Dutch colony via Holland in the 1600s. This oft-photographed landscape reflects the multiculturalism and tolerance that Suriname is known for. One U.S. embassy official calls Suriname "not a melting pot but a salad bowl" of Hindustanis, Creoles, Javanese, Amerindians, Chinese, and Anglo-Saxons. Indeed, every civilian government in recent history has been made up of a balanced coalition of political parties that represent these ethnicities. And while Islam is the majority faith in this nation of 450,000, there are significant minorities of Christians, Jews, Hindus, and animists. In addition, Suriname boasts a high literacy rate, a Dutch-influenced Western culture, and a strong desire to link its economy more closely to the United States, which is one of the country's top trading partners. Suriname, in other words, would appear to be an ideal target for Washington's efforts to win Muslim hearts and minds. Yet U.S. public diplomacy is failing as badly here as it is almost everywhere else in the Muslim world.

Instead, anti-Americanism has arrived in Suriname. In the spring, when the United States attempted to help an American woman regain custody of her daughter, who'd been illegally taken to Suriname by her father, local newspapers alleged that the embassy was involved in a kidnapping plot. Some Surinamese officials have also begun to harshly criticize Washington. Suriname's former ambassador to the United Nations told me that "the U.S. is intent on pursuing a dangerous unilateral approach" to global affairs. A Surinamese defense official insists that Washington "is lashing out in anger at the Muslim world after 9/11." Over breakfast, several prominent Muslims agreed with one Islamic society leader when he said that the U.S. war on terror "is a war against the Muslim world."

More daunting was my visit to the tiny Al-Iman mosque on Paramaribo's outskirts, where militant Islam could be gaining a foothold. Some 20 Javanese Muslim congregants were seemingly honored to sit shoeless and cross-legged on the floor of their mosque with an American emissary. But they were equally proud that their Arabic and Islam lessons were taught by a young Saudi-trained cleric from Indonesia--something that could foretell a rise in militant Wahhabism. One U.S. intelligence official recently expressed concerns in The Washington Times about Suriname's "historical nexus to Indonesia, the home of Jemaah Islamiah, which is affiliated with al-Qaeda and responsible for the Bali bombing." Suriname's Defense Minister, Ronald Assen admitted on November 6 that Ali Imron, the Indonesian sentenced to life in prison for his role in the October 2002 Bali bombing that killed 202 people, spent a year living in the Surinamese city of Mungo, where he taught at a Muslim school.

If Washington loses the battle for hearts and minds here, it would have only itself to blame. Increasing U.S. subsidies for American rice growers have angered Surinamese farmers, who used to control a large share of the regional Caribbean rice market. And though the tiny U.S. embassy in Paramaribo is working hard to cast U.S. policies in the most positive light, Washington has expended very limited resources in development assistance. When Suriname achieved its independence in 1975, it also received a $3.5 billion payout from the Netherlands, which Paramaribo is still collecting today. By contrast, the United States has offered Suriname a mere $5 million in military aid per year, as well as "an additional few hundred thousand for the fight against drugs and thugs," according to an embassy spokesperson. USAID has 17 offices throughout South America and the Caribbean, but none in Suriname. As one U.S. official admits, "it's not a lot of assistance. In fact, the whole Caribbean gets very little." And though the embassy in Suriname likes to sponsor public diplomacy missions, my four-day trip to Surinam in October was only one of two such missions this year.

Even the more generous aspects of American aid have become a source of tension. Over the last decade, the United States has held eight Medical Readiness Training Exercises (MEDRETE) in Suriname, which provide free healthcare to natives in Surinam's rugged and undeveloped interior. This is a vital service in the country's many poverty stricken areas, where healthcare is available but deficient in a number of crucial medical specialties. Still, any goodwill generated by these exercises was likely offset by recent U.S. pressure on Suriname to exempt American forces from the International Criminal Court. Local leaders were angered when Pentagon officials reportedly asked Paramaribo to sign an agreement exempting Americans if the country is to continue receiving the free healthcare under MEDRETE.

Making things worse is that American officials are doing a poor job getting their message across on television in Suriname. Derrice Dean, host of a one-hour, once-a-week Voice of America Television show called "Caribbean Perspectives," believes that "there is not a great effort in getting VOA into the Caribbean," and that the effort there is "not getting a lot of funding." Indeed, she believes that the Caribbean is just "not volatile enough for America to be concerned about. You just don't feel the need to penetrate." Embassy officials note that programming in Hindi and Urdu is picked up by one local television affiliate, but that program only targets some 30 percent of the population. VOA English programming for television is rarely aired. Accordingly, few of the Surinamese officials or academics I spoke with were familiar with the extensive U.S. plans to rebuild Iraq, or anything about the State Department's efforts to foster democracy in the Arab world. Instead, most Surinamers assumed the United States was simply allowing conditions in the Muslim world to deteriorate.

Thankfully, radical Islam has not planted deep roots in Suriname. Every Surinamer I spoke with said they rejected the idea of terrorism against the United States. Most say that they like Americans, just not Washington's foreign policy. Ironically, one Muslim community leader I spoke with sheepishly admitted that more Muslims might have joined a demonstration against the Iraq war in Paramaribo's Independence Square, but were "afraid that the U.S. would revoke their visas." With so much going for it in Suriname, it would be even more ironic if Washington lost the battle for opinion here.

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