

How to Win Friends and Influence Arabs: Rethinking Public Diplomacy in the Middle East

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Aug 18, 2003

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Articles & Testimony

Like a sports team after a dismal season, the State Department is going through a "rebuilding process" to figure out how to win Arab and Muslim friends. As depressing statistics about anti-Americanism continue to mount, especially in the Middle East, Foggy Bottom recently announced the formation of a new committee, headed by former diplomat Edward P. Djerejian, to repair its woeful "public diplomacy" toward Arabs and Muslims.

Djerejian, head of State's Near East bureau under then-secretary James Baker, has served for the last decade as founding director of the James A. Baker III Institute of Public Policy at Rice University. In what could herald a revival of Baker's team at State, Djerejian is likely to pass his committee's findings to another Baker veteran -- Margaret Tutwiler, former State spokesman and current ambassador to Morocco -- who is expected to take over the department's top public diplomacy job in the autumn.

Creation of Djerejian's 14-member panel comes four months after the resignation of controversial public diplomacy chief Charlotte Beers, the onetime advertising executive. Under Beers, the buzzword was "branding," the idea that America could earn the loyal support of customers around the world through the sort of image-oriented campaign that wins repeat shoppers to Wal-Mart. Through a series of "I'm okay, you're okay" initiatives to Muslim audiences -- television commercials, websites, and speakers programs -- Beers tried to reconnect the world's billion Muslims with the United States the way McDonald's highlights its billion customers served.

The results were disastrous. Many Muslim countries refused to air the TV spots, while many who saw them damned the ads as puerile propaganda. At home, complaints about the Madison Avenue approach to diplomacy grew numerous. The most definitive sign that Beers had finally lost the confidence of the White House came this year as the administration proposed a net decrease in State Department spending on public diplomacy, despite the universally recognized need to improve America's message abroad. Beers resigned on March 3.

Not everyone agrees on the reasons for Beers's failure. The Djerejian committee will hear three different analyses. Each one portends a wholly different approach to public diplomacy.

One view holds that Beers was right to focus on common values (such as family, home, religion) and cultural interests (pop music, sports) that Americans share with foreign Muslims, but that she was too tentative and cautious

in pressing the case. Advocates of this view -- such as proponents of the new U.S. government-funded Arabic radio and satellite television networks -- believe that blitzing Arab and Muslim countries with Britney Spears videos and Arabic-language sitcoms will earn Washington millions of new Muslim sympathizers.

A second view holds that many Muslims hate us for who we are, so unless we are going to change our spots, we should stop worrying about Muslim sensibilities altogether. Washington is the new Rome, these realpoliticians say, and an imperial power -- even a benign one -- should focus its energies on efficiency, not popularity. The only public diplomacy that matters, this argument goes, comes with victory (over al Qaeda, the Taliban, Saddam, etc.).

A third view holds that Muslims hate us for what we do, not who we are, and counsels that we must change our policies if we hope to restore some luster to America's standing. Adherents -- mostly critics of current U.S. Middle East policy -- urge Washington to distance itself from Israel, get out of Iraq, and abandon President Bush's revolutionary talk about promoting freedom in Iran.

If Djerejian's panel is smart, it will reject all three approaches.

Yes, many Muslims do disagree with aspects of our Middle East policy, but selling out our friends, like Israel, to suit our critics is just an invitation to blackmail.

Yes, winning the war on terror is vital for U.S. security, but our anti-terror campaign will require local partners to ensure that the terrorists are on the run, not just underground.

And yes, values matter, but most Muslims aren't teeny-boppers who can be swayed by a rap artist from the 'hood who extols the virtues of Islam. Incidentally, the State Department really does spend tax money on promoting a Muslim rap group, Native Deen, whose lead singer, Joshua Salaam, is civil rights director for the Hamas-friendly Council for American-Islamic Relations. Salaam once praised the terrorists who blew up the USS Cole for having "a lot of guts to attack the United States military." Very ironic, of course, as is the fact that Salaam himself served four years in the U.S. Air Force.

How, then, should the job of promoting American interests be approached? The first step is to recognize that a successful public diplomacy relies on three ingredients: a short-term focus on image, a long-term investment in future allies, and, most of all, a consistent emphasis on promoting U.S. interests.

Advancing U.S. policies must be the touchstone of all public diplomacy. Sounds obvious, but it is actually a radical statement, completely out of touch with the State Department's feel-good outreach to Arabs and Muslims over the past two years. In the post-9/11 world, we help neither ourselves nor the millions of moderate Muslims around the world by substituting serious talk about the dangers of militant Islam with dumbed-down, Rodney King-style patter about everyone "getting along."

It is true that many Muslims disagree with U.S. policies, but what they know often comes from the distorted, caricatured view of reality propagated by irresponsible local media prevalent in most Muslim countries. Those media have a field day with U.S. policy because most U.S. officials rarely talk to them -- adult to adult -- about what our views really are and why we hold them. For example: Despite the fact that the FBI's most wanted terrorist list includes three Hezbollah operatives responsible for the 1983 bombings of the U.S. embassy in Beirut, the current U.S. ambassador in Lebanon closed his remarks at the solemn ceremony marking the twentieth anniversary of that heinous act of terrorism by extolling the power of "forgiveness." One hardly wants to know who he thinks is supposed to forgive whom?

With rare exceptions, such as David Welch in Egypt and Ronald Neumann in Bahrain, U.S. officials in the Arab world hardly ever take the trouble to explain to local audiences, plainly and dispassionately, why Americans support Israel, oppose militant Islam, and feared Saddam Hussein. But the U.S. government, in an odd effort to promote Arab

contributions toward Middle East peace, did spend thousands of dollars last month broadcasting and distributing a program on its international television network that suggested the way to achieve progress was to "pressure Israel." This is cockeyed.

Polishing America's image is a key element of public diplomacy too, but only if it is imbued with purpose. One example of a failure waiting to happen is the U.S. government's new Arabic language radio station, Sawa.

In 2002, Sawa became the darling of Capitol Hill based on a listener poll showing that it had won a large audience in several Arab countries through an innovative mix of pop and Arabic music, interspersed with brief, informative, U.S.-style news reports. But Sawa's braintrust rested on these flimsy laurels, opting not to beef up its content with significantly more news, analysis, and talk. (Instead, it heralded further listener poll numbers that its news content was "just right.") The result is that Sawa is on the verge of becoming just another radio station, easily replicable, instead of something uniquely American.

Arab and Muslim leaders aren't stupid. They may not have devised Sawa's music mix, but they know how to copy it. Last month, Jordanian army radio launched its own new station based on the pop-Arabic music format; Morocco already has a station with this cross-cultural mix; others are sure to follow. So unless Sawa begins to provide its listeners with a message they will never get from local radio stations, it is doomed.

Getting the questions of interests and image right is not enough. Unless our public diplomacy is reoriented to support our friends, isolate our critics, and punish our adversaries it will remain part of America's problem abroad, not part of the solution. Sadly, much of what we do today is just the opposite.

Instead of investing money and effort to help millions of secular, liberal Muslims who fear the spread of Wahhabi radicalism, we spend our time searching under every rock for elusive "moderate Islamists." Incredible as it sounds, the U.S. government also spends tax dollars to subsidize study visits to the United States by radical Islamist journalists, to send outspoken critics of U.S. policy on speaking tours abroad, and to teach anti-American Islamist parliamentarians how to criticize pro-Western governments more effectively.

Every dime spent on such masochistic folly should instead go to investing in our local allies, the brave men and women who fight the daily battle to educate their kids and raise wholesome families in the face of rising religious totalitarianism. This means encouraging American businesses abroad to adopt local schools and support technical training, pumping up the pittance we spend on English-language education, and targeting our exchange programs to reward our current friends and identify future ones. Washington has begun to get some things right, such as restarting Arabic-language publishing after a decade in which all print ventures were scrapped in favor of Internet-based outreach -- a silly idea given that the Middle East is the world's least-linked region of the world. But it is far too little and much too late.

Three principles -- promoting our interests, investing in allies, and advancing a principled image of ourselves -- should form the core of America's redesigned public diplomacy. Of course, even if we do all this, we may never win popularity contests in Cairo or Casablanca. But if Djerejian and company get it right, then at least our soldiers and our public diplomacy specialists will be fighting on the same side. ❖

Weekly Standard

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)