

Diplomacy Run Amuck

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Articles & Testimony

President George W. Bush recently articulated his case for liberating Iraq before the world at the United Nations, but unfortunately, his speech stands alone, not part of a larger, focused public diplomacy strategy. In fact, America's public diplomacy campaign is rudderless and, at times, counterproductive. One of the most glaring examples involves the radical Palestinian terrorist group Hamas.

In mid-July, special coordinator for public diplomacy Ambassador Christopher Ross, a senior State Department official recruited back into service from retirement to spearhead the administration's public diplomacy campaign in the Middle East, requested a meeting with the Islamic Action Front (IAF) in Jordan.

The IAF, an Islamist party affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, agreed to hold a meeting but only at the group's Amman offices, not the US embassy in Amman as Ross had requested. At the meeting, which lasted 90 minutes, Ross and other US officials sat with IAF leaders including the group's secretary-general Hamza Mansour, and IAF officials Jamil Abu Baker and Abdul Latif Arabiyat.

In a press conference a few days later, Mansour asserted that he informed Ross that "Arabs and Muslims view the US as an enemy because it places Arabs under siege, as is the case with Iraq, provides the Zionist entity [Israel] with weapons and protects Israel's actions against Palestinians in front of the UN Security Council." He further asserted that the US "promotes hatred in the Western world against Arabs and Muslims in the name of the war against terrorism."

Though part of a "public diplomacy" effort, US officials have been reluctant to discuss this meeting, which they do not deny took place.

On July 31, just two weeks after Ross's meeting with the IAF, a Hamas bombing at Jerusalem's Hebrew University killed seven civilians, including five Americans, and wounded 86 others, including Israeli and foreign students. The next day, the IAF sponsored a mass rally in support of Hamas and the "Jenin martyrs" at which IAF leaders proudly lauded the university bombing as a "bold, heroic operation."

Addressing the rally, Mansour highlighted the IAF's commitment to supporting Hamas and asserted that the Hebrew University attack cost \$50,000, which "necessitates giving large financial aid to the Palestinian people to carry out more operations of this kind." Mansour further urged the Jordanian people and Arab nation "to contribute

generously to the Palestinian people so that they could buy the weapons and necessary equipment for confronting the Israeli arrogance."

While a vigorous public diplomacy campaign including elements with whom we do not necessarily see eye to eye is critical, the Bush doctrine's zero tolerance for terrorism is severely undermined when senior US officials engage in a dialogue with groups directly linked to terrorism.

Meeting with groups such as the IAF do not yield information on how to combat terrorism. Instead, they give voice, standing and legitimacy to the very groups our public diplomacy should be seeking to silence and marginalize. Actions such as these may be the impetus behind the administration's July 30 announcement that the White House's Office on Global Communications would soon direct the administration's public diplomacy campaign, a move widely seen as a measure of the administration's displeasure with State's judgement in this arena.

Counterterrorism efforts must target operational and logistical cells with equal vigor. American officials should learn from their past mistakes and take firm, decisive action against both operational and logistical terrorist elements.

For example, Hamas was named a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) group under Executive Order 13224 on November 2, 2001. This authorizes the US government to impose sanctions against individuals and organizations that "associate" with the named terrorist groups. At a minimum, the IAF's solicitation of funds for further terrorist attacks certainly qualifies as "associating" with Hamas.

In November, the president warned, "If you harbor a terrorist, you are a terrorist. If you feed a terrorist or fund a terrorist, you are a terrorist, and you will be held accountable by the United States and our friends."

US officials should certainly not be meeting with the likes of the IAF. In fact, the United States should now hold the IAF accountable, freeze its funds, and bar its leaders from entering the United States. ❖

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