

Battling for the 'Hearts and Minds' of Middle Easterners, Post-September 11:

A Year-End Assessment

by [Martin Kramer \(/experts/martin-kramer\)](/experts/martin-kramer)

Sep 23, 2002

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Martin Kramer \(/experts/martin-kramer\)](/experts/martin-kramer)

Martin Kramer is The Washington Institute's Walter P. Stern Fellow and author of one of its most widely read monographs, *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*.



Brief Analysis

On September 9, 2002, Martin Kramer and Mouafac Harb addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum with Robert Satloff. Dr. Kramer is the Wexler-Fromer fellow at the Institute, editor of *Middle East Quarterly*, and author of the Institute's best-selling publication *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America* (2001). Mr. Harb is the news director for the new, U.S.-funded Radio Sawa and former Washington bureau chief for the independent Arabic daily *al-Hayat*. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks. [Read Dr. Satloff's remarks. \(templateC05.php?CID=1535\)](#)

Public diplomacy in the Middle Eastern context is not a new problem. Every non-Muslim state that has projected its power into the Middle East has had to win over the "hearts and minds" of the Muslim population under its control. Muslim Middle Easterners have always viewed the projection of non-Muslim power into the region with suspicion. Nevertheless, America does not have to reinvent the public diplomacy wheel. The United States should learn from the history of the European experience in the Middle East and from its own successful public diplomacy efforts in the Cold War era.

The United States did not have a public diplomacy campaign in the Middle East before September 11 because the Cold War made such efforts unnecessary. In comparison to the Soviet Union -- which actively ruled over Muslim-majority areas, where it shut down mosques and limited religious freedoms -- the United States seemed like a proreligious and tolerant force. Yet, once the Soviet Union folded and the United States became the only superpower, America was made the focal point of hostility by Middle Eastern countries searching for an external scapegoat for their own internal problems. Even so, it was not until September 11 that the United States understood the need for a serious public diplomacy campaign in the Muslim world. Washington had previously relied on friendly Muslim governments to promote its interests to their populations. Since September 11, it has become apparent that these governments are either unwilling or unable to do so.

In its efforts to improve its image in the Middle East, the United States should be careful to avoid three potential public diplomacy mistakes. First, public diplomacy should not be confused with policymaking. One example of such

confusion is the argument that the best way to pursue successful public diplomacy is to alter American policy so as to make it easier to sell. This argument conflates ends with means. Public diplomacy would be unnecessary if American policies were easy to sell. The aim of public diplomacy is to persuade foreigners to support, or at least acquiesce to, policies that they would normally tend to dislike or oppose. American foreign policy is the product of a complex process; the job of public diplomacy officers is not to lament the outcome of this process, but rather to sell the end product.

Second, public diplomacy should not be turned into an instrument for domestic promotion of the multicultural ideal. That is, public diplomacy should not be confused with affirmative action or empowerment programs for Arab Americans. The first objective of any public diplomacy program should be to sell American policy, not to promote diversity. Disseminating an unambiguous message is paramount.

Third, the United States should base its public diplomacy campaign more on persuasion than on listening. As such, the phrase "public diplomacy" is problematic in and of itself. "Public diplomacy" implies a willingness to compromise. Along the same lines, the Council on Foreign Relations has recommended that special "listening tours" be implemented. Although listening is important, there are already sufficient apparatuses in place for this task, namely, American embassies and intelligence agencies. If the U.S. public diplomacy campaign is fashioned into simply another avenue for reportage on foreign opinion, then it will have been a wasted opportunity. A "Department of Public Diplomacy" would make a difference only if it took responsibility for relentlessly communicating a unified message to the Arab and Muslim worlds. Every muscle and sinew of American public diplomacy should be devoted to just this task.

MOUAFAC HARB

Because any given country's foreign policies are designed to serve that country's national interests, they will always cause conflicts when they run counter to the interests of others. As a result, governments have ample reason to mitigate the tensions caused by such conflicts of interest by implementing serious public diplomacy campaigns. September 11 proved that terrorist organizations have become increasingly sophisticated in their use of the media to promote their ideologies and political grievances, and that, by contrast, the United States has been particularly lax in this regard. Until recently, Washington simply did not have an effective medium through which to get its message across to Arab countries.

Studies show that the primary source of information for most citizens of Muslim countries is television. Government-owned television networks have many shortcomings, which creates an opening for satellite channels such as al-Jazeera. Competition between satellite channels in the Arab world is not based on presenting the best news. Unfortunately, the more anti-American a station is, the bigger its viewing audience.

Faced with this situation, the U.S. government decided even before September 11 that it needed to increase its efforts to reach Arab publics. One instrument chosen for this endeavor is Radio Sawa, a network of FM stations in the Middle East (soon to include AM as well). In the campaign to win "hearts and minds," Radio Sawa has targeted the young. After all, 65 percent of the Arab population is under the age of thirty. For that reason, most of Radio Sawa's on-air time is devoted to popular music, interspersed with short news broadcasts. The mission of Radio Sawa is to provide accurate news in Arabic, highlighting the difference between propaganda and real news. Its target audience is not those who hate America, but those who resent it. If the audience likes what they hear, their resentment may turn to understanding.

The United States cannot simply rely on its friends to spread its message in the Middle East; public diplomacy cannot be subcontracted to local governments. If the "friendly Arab regimes" had to choose between appeasing America and pleasing their masses, they would choose the latter.

Public diplomacy therefore presents a unique challenge to the United States. Washington has had very little success in this arena, primarily because its expectations regarding public diplomacy have been too low. Hence, it is important to note the successes of existing initiatives. For example, Radio Sawa is already showing signs of making headway. Even supporters of Saddam Husayn have begun to tune in to its broadcasts because of the accuracy and dependability of its fact-based news.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Nazgol Ashouri.

Policy #662

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

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](/policy-analysis/us-policy)