

# Battling for Hearts and Minds in the Middle East: A Critique of U.S. Public Diplomacy, Post–September 11

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

On September 9, 2002, Robert Satloff, The Washington Institute's director of policy and strategic planning, addressed the Institute's Special Policy Forum with Martin Kramer and Mouafac Harb. The following is an edited and expanded version of Dr. Satloff's remarks. [Read a summary \(templateC05.php?CID=1540\)](#) of Dr. Kramer and Mr. Harb's remarks.

In terms of public diplomacy (PD), the U.S. government's record since September 11 is poor. This failing grade is due to a combination of factors: faulty strategic direction from PD policymakers, who have put a premium on a well-intentioned but highly counterproductive effort "to be liked" at the expense of policy advocacy; flawed tactical decisions that have lent an aura of endorsement to some of the most virulent critics (and critiques) of U.S. interests and policy; a lack of speed and creativity in taking advantage of the post-September 11 window to develop and implement new PD projects and initiatives (some of which are actually resurrected old projects that were prematurely terminated); and over-reliance on the powers of broadcasting and a concomitant lack of attention and adequate funding to medium- and long-term aspects of the "hearts and minds" campaign. An assessment of the past year suggests that the heart of the problem lies in Washington, not in the field, where most PD professionals toil with woefully inadequate resources and poor policy direction. Even in the field, however, some are reluctant to press the case for U.S. policy, preferring instead to focus efforts on winning admiration for and sympathy with U.S. values.

## Key Problems

- "We don't have a correct definition of who the good guys are and who the bad guys are." Condemnation of the September 11 attacks should not be the sole criterion for determining America's allies in the war on terror; too many theologians, scholars, and leaders in Arab and Muslim countries condemn al-Qaeda while glorifying the suicide terrorists of Hamas and Islamic Jihad and/or fueling the virulent anti-Americanism in regional media. Touting the September 11 condemnations of such clerics as the Qatari Yusuf al-Qaradawi (who endorsed suicide bombings) and Saudi Shaykh Abdul Rahman al-Sudais (who described Jews as "scum of humanity . . . the rats of the world . . . pigs and monkeys") in the State Department's flagship "Network of Terrorism" booklet is a mistake, as is any effort by senior officials to "dialogue" with such terrorist fellow-travelers as the Islamic Action Front in Jordan. These efforts

only provide succor to America's enemies and undermine its true friends.

- > "We lend support to the wrong people in the culture wars being fought in Arab and Muslim societies." In the war on terror, America's allies (current and future) are the liberalizing, modernizing forces fighting against the cultural totalitarianism gaining ground throughout the Middle East. Yet, the State Department's flagship outreach website -- "Muslim Life in America" -- sends precisely the wrong message to such forces. (This subsite is featured on the website of every U.S. embassy in the Middle East and is found on the State Department's International Information Programs website, which reportedly receives 60 million hits per year.) For example, in its goodhearted but profoundly counterproductive effort to project American tolerance abroad, this website projects the image that virtually all American Muslim women (and the large majority of American Muslim girls) are veiled, hardly a message of support to the Afghan women now free to choose whether to wear the burqa; to Iranian women fighting to throw off the chador; or to Turkish women, whose contribution to building a democracy in an overwhelmingly Muslim state should be celebrated. The same U.S. government website offers a ludicrous dictionary of Islamic terminology (e.g., the definition of "jihad" says that the term "should not be confused with Holy War, which does not exist in Islam") and highlights quotations by U.S. experts who otherwise hold views diametrically opposed to U.S. policy (e.g., a news story that features a University of Michigan professor who has written a Middle East politics curriculum for high school teachers that counsels "minimal reference to terrorism" because, as he states, "[E]ven people who have engaged in attacks on innocent civilians have legitimate human interests in security, dignity, and self-government").

- > "We place too much emphasis on advertising America's religious tolerance and not enough on advocating policy." A review of the "Fact Sheet for Public Diplomacy in Action" in the State Department's "Press Kit for the War on Terror" underscores the fact that the lion's share of the department's PD efforts are aimed at promoting America's record of religious tolerance to Muslim and Arab states and peoples. (Incidentally, the fact sheet includes not a word about PD efforts since September 11 to Europe, Latin America, China, India, or other predominantly non-Muslim parts of the world.) Such a strategy makes little sense in light of the fact that America's record on tolerance is not a central issue for the vast majority of Middle Easterners. Indeed, if anything, most would say that Americans are too tolerant -- too promiscuous, too libertine, too open to various lifestyles and competing views of the world. In other words, the U.S. government is spending much of its time fighting the wrong war.

#### Defining Appropriate Goals for Public Diplomacy

For the Middle East, the "right" PD war should be defined modestly as the campaign to ensure that the United States -- its leaders, spokesmen, and citizens -- get a fair hearing, not a hearing dominated by the xenophobic, anti-Western, anti-American, anti-Semitic media and old-style educational systems that tend to dominate in many countries. Regrettably, even this modest goal does not seem to be shared by the policymakers who shape the U.S. PD effort.

In her June 11 congressional testimony, Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Charlotte Beers outlined three strategic goals for U.S. PD abroad: representing American values and beliefs; demonstrating the opportunities that result from democratization, good governance, and open markets; and supporting the education of the young. Although all of these goals are necessary, this "mission statement" is sorely insufficient.

First, it does not include any aspect of policy advocacy. (As defined once by the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, "public diplomacy" is "the communication of U.S. interests and ideals beyond governments to foreign publics.") Although PD encompasses more than policy advocacy, such advocacy must be at the core of all PD campaigns. It is essential to have spokespeople for the United States advocating U.S. policy, not just celebrating American values.

Second, it is insufficient to argue that the United States merely "supports education of the young." Washington needs to be concerned with the content of education, not just the fact of education; the United States should focus on what

Middle Easterners are learning, reading, hearing, and watching. This has four components:

1. The United States should aggressively and consistently (yet always deliberately and factually) combat virulent anti-American propaganda that passes for journalism in many countries. Remarkably, there appears to be no single office or contact at the State Department with specific responsibility for this task.
2. The United States should be competing for the minds of young Muslims through education. There are many ways to do this: sending books overseas; training teachers; participating in curriculum reform; matching American and Middle Eastern universities and technical-training institutes; fostering more American studies programs; and so forth. A good place to start is distance learning, which costs little and is relatively easy to manage. Regrettably, there is not a single Middle East-related project referenced on the website of the federal government's Interagency Working Group on this issue.
3. The United States should be judicious in expanding its broadcasting efforts in the Middle East. The new Radio Sawa is an innovative approach to gaining market share and should be supported, so long as the early emphasis on music begins to give way to substantive content. At the same time, the Bush administration should be wary of plans to duplicate Sawa's model elsewhere in the region; for example, Voice of America-Persian has a much greater and more loyal following than Voice of America-Arabic ever did, and it should not simply be jettisoned in favor of a Persian variant of Sawa. More important, Washington should be wary of trying to apply the Sawa model to satellite television. Not only have U.S. government broadcasters not yet fully grappled with the difficulties of juggling between surrogate and nonsurrogate objectives, but at the moment there is no conceivable, acceptable programming that could compete with the sensationalism of existing Arab satellite television channels. For the foreseeable future, the money targeted for a U.S. government experiment in satellite television would be better spent on other projects.
4. Perhaps most important, the Bush administration should consider a substantial increase in funding for English-language training abroad, which may be the most valuable marginal dollar that could be spent for public diplomacy. With a working knowledge of English, young Arabs and Muslims around the world can access existing U.S. satellite television, U.S. newspapers and magazines, and U.S. educational opportunities, listening to U.S. leaders and ordinary Americans without the filter of translation. Through English, young people enter a portal to globalization that, almost by definition, gives America a chance to be heard. According to the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs, the U.S. government spent a paltry \$10 million worldwide in support of English-language teaching in 2001, with only about \$1 million targeted at the Middle East. The price of existing U.S.-sponsored English-language training programs is often prohibitive, amounting (in some places) to a half or more of a country's per capita income. Instead of pricing English out of the market for the vast majority of Middle Easterners, the United States should make English education affordable to all. Washington should set a goal of becoming as efficient in exporting English as wahhabis are in exporting their brand of Islam to madrasas around the world.

## Conclusion

Over the past year, the Bush administration has done much right in the war on terrorism. Sadly, its public diplomacy effort is not one of those successes. Washington does have some positive accomplishments to its credit. For example, there are some excellent pro-democracy websites produced by the State Department that appear on some (though not all) Middle East embassy websites, and some embassies have undertaken innovative programming of their own with local media and schools. In general, however, U.S. public diplomacy over the past year has emphasized the wrong priorities, the wrong message, and the wrong programs. Thankfully, battling for hearts and minds is a long-term project, and it is not too late for the United States to fight the good fight. But Washington does have a lot of catching up to do.

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