

Promoting America's Image Abroad: The Impact on the War against Terrorism

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Brief Analysis

The United States is viewed with suspicion by much of the rest of the world, and its motives are consistently questioned for several reasons. This reality can be addressed through actionable goals. First, the United States is perceived as being too big, a hyperpower whose global reach is threatening. Second, dialogue with the Middle East is almost nonexistent, and when it does occur, the fundamental concepts underpinning American democracy, such as the rule of law, are often misunderstood and need to be explained. Third, American studies programs, which could be used to bridge the understanding and dialogue gap, are now nonexistent at Middle Eastern universities. Finally, the United States has a very small share in the kind of debate that takes place in the new global village, where communication is nearly instantaneous and a rumor sent via email can reach half the world's population by the end of a business day. In particular, the inaccurate perception that, post-September 11, the United States is waging a war against Islam both at home and abroad has been widespread.

To combat these problems, U.S. public diplomacy officers have begun to stress several key concepts when dialoguing with the international community. We are emphasizing U.S. values and those of the American people, as well as the role of democracy in promoting prosperity and economic productivity. We are also prioritizing explanations of how ongoing U.S. aid programs benefit the general population rather than just the governmental elites. In addition, we are interested in influencing the younger generation in the Middle East.

This administration has undertaken several projects to translate these concerns and concepts into reality. For example, a program portraying Muslim life in America focuses on the religious freedom afforded in this country. We have also determined that those who have visited the United States have a more accurate and positive image of America, which they then convey to others in their own society. Toward this end, our exchange programs permit academics, journalists, and other professionals to visit the United States in order to engage in dialogue with American counterparts. In another facet of this program, we send American speakers around the world to discuss issues identified as important by the regional bureaus of the State Department and our embassies abroad. We have also sent Muslim and Arab Americans to the Middle East to open up a dialogue with their regional colleagues and invite them to come to the United States to share their views with Americans.

The Middle East Radio Network has been pushed to the fore as a key tool for promoting the understanding of U.S. culture in the region. Other ideas that are beginning to take shape include a young adult Arab magazine that would, among other things, present profiles of Middle Eastern students studying in the United States. An alumni databank of Middle Eastern scholars and journalists who have spent time in America is also in the offing. One of the more exciting initiatives we are undertaking on the internet is a "virtual room," where people can log on from anywhere in the world to learn more about the United States. The room would target each country individually, stressing key relationship points between that country and America. There is also a lot of information available about Islam and the Middle East on the State Department website.

In a separate initiative, we are developing better opportunities for foreign journalists covering the United States,

although there are some glitches in the program. For instance, although there were as many foreign as national correspondents at President Bush's ranch in Crawford, Texas recently, many of the foreign journalists were housed in Waco and only given limited access to media events taking place in Crawford. To smooth the lines of communication between the foreign press and the U.S. government, a regional media center is being created. The center will have substantial powers to grant key interviews and provide logistical support to foreign journalists.

One of the major public diplomacy challenges we face in the Middle East is accurately conveying the U.S. position concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In particular, the perception that America supports "Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories" must be addressed, and our response is multifaceted. First, on an everyday basis, public diplomacy experts in Washington are responsible for assuring that policy statements made by the administration are clearly and quickly disseminated. Every major administration speech appears on the State Department website in six languages, including Arabic. In addition, public diplomacy officers in U.S. embassies are encouraged to engage in dialogue with the citizens of their host country. But our dominant response strategy is to focus on longer-term efforts, such as economic ties and education. These programs will take time to construct, but eventually they will yield greater possibilities for dialogue with those who are receptive; unfortunately, some are beyond convincing no matter what information is available to them.

Other public diplomacy mediums include popular culture, which has a certain limited role in conveying our message; for instance, some movies are quite helpful. And we have also seen some success with a concept that originated in Kosovo. The U.S. embassy there, with the help and guidance of local actors, put together a short play presenting democracy, the American Constitution, and the rule of law. The play was much more successful at reaching the wider public than a dry lecture would have been, and we hope to reproduce this idea in other parts of the world. All of these programs require funding, which is expected to be forthcoming from Congress.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ehud Waldoks. ❖

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