Devising a Public Diplomacy Campaign toward the Middle East (Part II):

Core Elements

by Robert Satloff **(/experts/robert-satloff)**

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Brief Analysis

There are three basic elements of an integrated public diplomacy campaign -- media, education, and exchange. More needs to be done in each arena. But before the government falls prey to the appeal of waging "information warfare" via the airwaves as the main way to complement the military campaign now underway, it would be wise to invest in three areas first: making America's diplomats take seriously the goal of public outreach abroad and mandating the language requirements to make that possible; restoring funding and urgency to educational and exchange programs of proven success; and developing ways to engage the next generation of Middle Easterners, especially through English education and American studies programming. After all, the battle for hearts and minds, like the war on terror, is a long-term project.

Media

The easiest target for enhanced public diplomacy is broadcasting -- that is, television and radio -- but this is also the most delicate, difficult, and, potentially, the most problematic. In a perfect world, the U.S. government would compete for Middle Eastern listeners and viewers with its own network of powerful FM radio stations and satellite television channels that wins audience by appealing to the current tastes of Arabic-, Persian-, and Turkish-speaking Generation Xers and then provides educational, informational, cultural, and entertainment programming that expands minds and wins hearts. Regrettably, this is precisely what the U.S. government is ill suited to do. While the United States has a strong, if uneven, record in terms of surrogate radio to adversary states, broadcasting to strategically friendly but politically ambiguous states is much more difficult. Success would require a news organization as well-heeled, fleet-footed, and hi-tech as al-Jazeera, trying to win the sort of credibility that it took the BBC decades to acquire.

One obvious impediment will be personnel and oversight. Done properly, pro-U.S. radio and television would require hiring scores of Arab journalists and technicians to maintain local bureaus in many Arab and Muslim countries, providing the raw material for the local news and features that would give U.S. broadcasting its unique appeal. This runs two types of risks: either that the correspondents "go local" and fail to project adequately the pro-U.S. message

that is the rationale for the station, or that they (and their families) find themselves subject to enormous pressure -- both directly and indirectly, overt and subtle -- from local governments or nongovernmental political groups. (The pressure would be magnified in the event that U.S. radio or television tries to establish full-scale broadcast centers in the Middle East, as was the original intent of the new Middle East Radio Network soon to be launched by the Broadcasting Board of Governors.) In either case, finding and keeping the proper balance, without either subjecting staff to life-threatening situations or provoking the ire of Congress when broadcasts are not sufficiently pro-American, is a herculean task.

In the near term, it is important to enhance existing Voice of America programming to the Middle East and to proceed with the BBG's new radio initiative -- under careful and ongoing supervision -- so as to test the practicability of the concept. But it is at least as important and no less urgent to pursue lower-profile, lower-cost, less labor-intensive media work that is likely to provide more lasting "bang" for the public diplomacy "buck." This means building on opportunities -- people, programs, and technology -- that already exist. Operationally, this includes:

Providing career incentives for local diplomats, especially ambassadors, to do television, radio, and media outreach. Currently, the incentive structure works the wrong way, as ambassadors and other diplomats can get in trouble if they stray from anodyne State Department guidance but score few career points if they make media outreach a major focus. Instead, the State Department should borrow from the Pentagon model, legislated in the Goldwater-Nichols military reform act, that required officers with "joint" service to be promoted at least as fast as those without, thereby making "joint" service a career-enhancer rather than a dead end. In this context, the State Department should implement (perhaps as a result of new legislation) new policies making good performance at appearing on local media a major factor in the promotion process.

Regularizing the appearance of senior government officials on major foreign media. While the U.S. government should be modest about developing its own satellite television capability, it should assiduously take advantage of the scores of Middle East journalists -- print and electronic -- eager to air and publish the comments of U.S. officials. With a well-run public diplomacy program, appearances on regional broadcasting by the secretary of state and the national security advisor will be as routine as their appearance on Sunday morning network talk shows. Also, funding should be found to provide media training -- by both U.S. professionals and local experts -- to U.S. diplomats in the field.

Improving language skills of foreign service officers. The best public diplomacy efforts will fail if diplomats abroad lack language skills to relate to local media and, more generally, to engage ordinary people. In current practice, there is little incentive or support for improving language skills above a 3.0 rating, which is adequate for conversation but not for television or radio appearances. A target goal should be to improve the language skills of 10 percent of FSOs to a 4.0 or higher. This would require additional funds for training facilities and teachers, the time for FSOs to spend upgrading their skills, and the salary incentives to encourage language expertise, especially in strategically important languages like Arabic, Persian, Chinese, and the Turkic family of languages.

Funding programs and staff to restore or expand local-language magazines, translation programs, websites, and e-zines, whose budgets have been cut or lost ground to inflation in recent years. A key area is to expand programs to provide both original and translated articles to local and regional newspapers. (A State Department official recently confided that if five major Arabic newspapers or newsweeklies offered the U.S. government an "American page" to fill as it sees fit, it would take a year before any printable copy could be produced, given existing staffing and responsibilities.) In general, the decision to sacrifice printed materials to push internet-based programming was a mistake, given that the Middle East is one of the world's least-linked parts of the world. Middle Easterners read, and the written message -- in contrast to broadcasting -- can be recycled for multiple users.

Education

Curiously, thousands of U.S. students may study in Middle Eastern studies programs at the undergraduate and graduate level, but remarkably few Middle Eastern students study in American studies programs. In fact, the first graduate-level, certificate-granting program in American studies was just established in September 2000, at the University of Jordan in Amman. Individual courses exist here and there -- primarily at elite schools like the American Universities of Cairo and Beirut, often taught by traveling Fulbright scholars -- and a small number of U.S. universities are working to set up local branches or specialized professional schools. But despite these modest programs, the sad fact is that the vast majority of Arab university students have no opportunity to learn about American government, politics, society, or culture. (The U.S. government, for example, has never had an educational partnership grant linked to a Gulf state.) And the situation is, perhaps, even worse for the tens of millions of Middle Easterners in primary or secondary school.

That the people of the Middle East understand better how U.S. society works should be critically important to U.S. public diplomacy. Two priorities should be to promote such programs at major Middle East universities and to establish new avenues for cooperation with local educators to inject American studies modules into primary and secondary education. The U.S. government should begin to fund such programs with large grants to establish libraries and multi-year acquisition programs.

Two problems are finding adequately trained, politically reliable staff and finding the right mechanism to create programs at state-run universities where anti-Americanism runs high. At the beginning, it may be useful for the government to encourage a consortium of U.S. universities to work together to establish a network of distance-education programs (i.e., via internet) associated with local universities. Over time, full-scale programs could be established by leveraging public funds with private foundation grants. Perhaps the most important aspect will be finding a mechanism to entice students who may be skeptical about job prospects -- after all, what do you do in Cairo, Casablanca, or Muscat with a degree in American studies? Here, the U.S. government should work hand-in-hand with local American chambers of commerce and local branches of U.S. nongovernment institutions throughout the Middle East to establish mentoring and internship programs with a goal of guaranteeing a job to every graduate of an American studies program.

An especially high priority should be placed on investing in expanded English-language training programs throughout the region. English is the gateway into American culture and the global community, and expanding access to it for Middle Easterners provides the best chance for the success of all other public diplomacy efforts. Given that the content of much English teaching material focuses on sympathetic themes like democracy, free markets, and American studies, this provides double bang for the buck -- not only do students equip themselves with an essential language tool to compete in the global economy, but they familiarize themselves with U.S. culture, politics, and society in the process. Additional funding for "teaching the teachers" programs will be money well spent.

(One specialized area where a U.S. initiative -- working in tandem with U.S. and local Arab educators -- can make headway is in Holocaust education for Arab students. A survey of Holocaust and tolerance-related institutions here and abroad reveals that not a single module, text, or program for Holocaust education exists in an Arab country, even within the context of studying twentieth-century history, "genocides" around the world, or tolerance education -- perhaps one reason why there is so much misinformation, let alone denial, on the subject throughout the Middle East.)

At the same time, the U.S. government should do more to attract students to colleges and universities inside the United States, direct them to appropriate programs, and provide guidance, counseling, and, one should note, thorough oversight throughout their stay (and until their departure). This would require developing educational advising networks at U.S. embassies throughout the region, raising the level of expertise of overseas advisors, establishing full-time postings for regional educational coordinators, and equipping posts with up-to-date

technology. And once in the United States, Middle Eastern students comprise an excellent target audience for special public diplomacy outreach programs, such as regular lectures by U.S. officials at universities with large Middle Eastern student populations.

Exchanges

Regrettably, one of the lessons of September 11, evidenced by the months and years spent in America by the perpetrators, is that familiarity does not always breed sympathy, let alone friendship. Nevertheless, exchange programs have, over time, proven to be useful and relatively cost-effective tools in building positive relationships, one person at a time. Indeed, that is the secret of their success -- they need to be well targeted, individually designed, long enough to make a lasting impression, but not too long.

One fine program that deserves expansion is the Humphrey Fellowships, which bring mid-career professionals to the United States. With extra funding, overseas posts can identify a wider range of prospects, especially in the fields of NGO development, public health, journalists, education, and the environment. Here, it is important to seek out future and potential leaders to bring to America and not use fellowships to award personal friendships already made or to provide payback to political cronies of local officials. U.S. diplomats abroad need to be especially creative about recruiting such fellows, using the program both to encourage incipient signs of pro-Americanism and as a corrective measure for people whose critical views are not well-entrenched. Reaching out to less traditional applicants beyond the upper-crust elite would be beneficial, not least to encourage an appreciation for meritocracy as a core American value.

International visitor programs are also useful and constructive, but they too need to be more targeted than has been the case in recent years. Due to budget cuts, visitors have been lumped together into large and often unwieldy groups, sometimes with participants from a dozen or more countries. The result has been that visitors often learn much about other cultures and countries from their fellow visitors but less about U.S. society. In general, it is better to provide specialized (and more expensive) programming to a smaller group for a shorter time than a less carefully designed program to a larger group for a larger period of time. Targeted groups should include journalists, educators, legislators, judges, and community leaders. A special focus -- here and throughout the public diplomacy campaign -- needs to be made on women and youth.

Sending Americans abroad to act as goodwill ambassadors can be beneficial, too, though the political sensitivities are higher than hosting foreign visitors (i.e., every American sent abroad is assumed to represent the U.S. government) and a series of one-off contacts with a visiting American is less likely to leave a lasting impression than an immersion visit by a Middle Easterner to the United States. Sending Americans as goodwill ambassadors abroad requires especially close vetting. There are three categories of such private individuals: practical ambassadors (e.g., town managers, civic leaders, local health and education officials), cultural ambassadors (e.g., musicians, artists), and educational ambassadors (e.g., professors speaking on U.S. Middle East policy, American Muslims lecturing on religious tolerance in the United States). The first group should be most highly prized and preferred. In general, the first and second together are far more important -- and pose much less risk of funding the wrong type of spokesperson -- than the third. Also, to take full advantage of such visits, it is important that special consideration be given to facilitating ongoing, follow-up relations between visitors and local contacts, creating long-term, multi-year theme programs rather than a series of disparate speakers and topics, and studying ways to deepen the value of such exchanges.

Conclusion

In a public diplomacy campaign, like the war against terror itself, there will be no quick victories and few demonstrable successes. In devising this campaign, it is better to get it right than to do it fast; better to make

incremental progress than risk damage through grandiose schemes gone awry; and better to draw on the expertise of those who have been successful in other parts of the globe at other periods of time rather than leave the project to regionalists who may be more committed to understanding local cultures than projecting our own. Even with maximum funding, the cumulative impact of all the initiatives described above will only be felt over time and, regrettably, on the margin. But it is important that the United States make the effort to provide Middle Easterners with the opportunity to know about our politics, government, policies, and way of life and, on that basis, to make informed choices about their support for or opposition to the United States and how they wish to build their own future and own societies.

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