

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

## Basic Principles

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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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### Brief Analysis

The appearance of senior U.S. officials on the Qatari-based al-Jazeera satellite news channel is the first sign that Washington is taking seriously the need for enhanced "public diplomacy" as a vital component in the war against terrorism. In this arena, however, urgency needs to be tempered with realism. Rushing to enhance public diplomacy efforts without a clear understanding of objectives, constraints, sequence, and the different means at the government's disposal risks not only a dispersal of effort and wasted resources but, in the worst case, actually ceding important ground in the "hearts-and-minds" campaign. In devising public diplomacy toward the Middle East, the key to success will be to marry the principles of "make haste, slowly" and "do no harm."

### Objective

In general, a public diplomacy campaign waged in the current political context ought to have three basic components:

1. Explaining U.S. policy, candidly and without apology. America has a strong, positive record on issues of concern to Arabs and Muslims and should make its case. Washington should be justifiably proud of its military efforts to defend Muslim populations in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Kuwait; the health, welfare, and infrastructure improvements purchased by the tens of billions of dollars of assistance to the largest Arab state, Egypt; and the mutually beneficial relations it has with governments from Nigeria to Turkey to Indonesia. Similarly, the United States should not shy away from explaining its support for Israel and its generation-old effort to promote a peaceful, negotiated settlement of the Arab-Israeli dispute, nor should it flinch from highlighting the ongoing threat that Saddam Husayn poses to his people and the wider region and the need to maintain tight constraints on Saddam's ability to act on his oft-stated ambitions.
2. Providing alternative sources of credible, factual, relevant information, especially about the wider world but also about the local countries in which listeners and viewers live. Rather than seek to compete with the sensationalism that characterizes Arab satellite television stations, U.S.-produced news should be presented in a professional and dispassionate manner, but one that highlights free and open debate among responsible political elements. For

reasons outlined below, programming should be country-specific, as much as possible.

3. Projecting those core U.S. values that characterize U.S. society, especially tolerance, openness, meritocracy, and civic activism. This is a much more modest objective than aspiring to enlist popular support for U.S. policy throughout Arab and Muslim societies or to build future pro-American governments in the region. The objective here should be to expose Middle Easterners to information about the American way of life and to provide local populations with a choice about how they wish to develop their own societies, not that the United States is going to impose that choice on them. While the United States cannot award every Middle Easterner a visa, U.S. public diplomacy can give every reader, listener, and viewer a portal into the American way of life, providing them with an opportunity to learn that functioning, flourishing alternatives exist to their generally closed and illiberal societies.

#### Context

The first step in devising a public diplomacy campaign to complement the "war on terror" is to recognize the complexity of the challenge; the distinction between target-states and target-peoples; and fundamental differences between the current situation and the U.S.-Soviet ideological struggle of years past.

1. The targets in the current situation are populations of states whose governments range from those that are, more or less, supportive of U.S. security interests (e.g., Egypt, Saudi Arabia) to those that are inimical to our interests (e.g., Syria, Iran).

2. In terms of public diplomacy, the distinction between allies and adversaries is blurred. Both friendly and unfriendly states alike fend off domestic criticism of internal problems by offering wide latitude to anti-Americanism in all spheres of public discourse, especially media, culture, religion, and education. While this does not obviate the very real problem of animosity to U.S. policy in many corners of the Middle East, this does mean that U.S. public diplomacy will face an uphill battle in almost every Middle Eastern state.

3. In general, civil society organizations that, in other cultures and at other times, might be ready partners for U.S. public diplomacy either cannot or will not play that role in the current Middle East context. Some are Islamist in orientation and are avowedly anti-American. Many others, especially those involved in local health and welfare service delivery, are predominantly nonpolitical and must remain that way to avoid running afoul of the regime. Sadly, to the extent that they exist, the Walentas, Sharanskys, and Havels of the Middle East are not generally friendly to U.S. Middle East policy. Ironically, those most naturally sympathetic to the United States may be found in organizations connected to, though not directly part of, the regime, as well as in the business communities, though these organizations are also likely to make a distinction between U.S. values (which they appreciate) and U.S. policies (which they oppose). The bottom line is that organized civil society will not be a strong ally in this effort, though a handful of groups may support specific initiatives and deserve U.S. engagement.

Taken together, all this suggests the need for extreme humility in devising a public diplomacy campaign targeted toward the states and peoples in the Middle East. Thankfully, this region of the world is less critical to current U.S. military operations than was the case with the Gulf War a decade ago; today, the key Muslim-majority states in terms of the U.S. military effort are Pakistan and Uzbekistan, not Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Nevertheless, the Arab Middle East still needs to be a central concern because of other current U.S. interests and because the campaign against terror may before long turn its focus here. Nevertheless, as one pundit has noted, this part of the globe is undergoing a "clash within civilization," which any U.S. outreach effort can affect only on the margins and only over time.

Four immediate policy consequences emerge from the above:

1. The state-supported anti-Americanism of existing media/religious/educational elite institutions throughout the region means that any public diplomacy effort begins with the White House. Unless bilateral diplomacy addresses this issue at the highest levels -- that is, unless the president and his senior aides are willing to raise with leaders of

Egypt and other states the need to purge state-run media of its rampant anti-Americanism (and anti-Semitism), the need for the leaders themselves to adopt clear public stands against these noxious trends, and the need for friendly regimes to lower the vast array of bureaucratic barriers they place in the way of U.S. engagement with local NGOs and ordinary people -- then there is little chance that America's own public diplomacy campaign will register much success.

2. As much as possible, efforts at public diplomacy under the broad rubric of "Arab world" or "Muslim world" should be rejected in favor of country-specific initiatives. This flows from the fact that a key subtext of U.S. regional strategy should be to avoid feeding into transnational tides of pan-Arabism or pan-Islamism in favor of evolutionary political and economic change within existing state structures and national borders. On a practical level, it is important to recognize how diverse the Middle East actually is and, for example, to avoid lumping together the vastly different cultures and societies of Casablanca, Aleppo, Muscat, and Riyadh under the simplistic category of "Arab" or "Muslim."

3. Focusing on individual states, however, will pose its own set of problems. The difficulty of directing regime-specific messages (except via national "surrogate radio stations" like Radio Free Iraq) will perforce dictate a lowest-common-denominator form of public diplomacy throughout the region, so as not to provoke insurrectionary sentiment in countries where it could backfire against U.S. interests. Even so, the administration is still going to face stiff opposition, primarily from "friendly regimes" who are likely to view an enhanced public diplomacy effort as meddling interference in local affairs.

4. The paucity of local partners, even in countries with significant civil society institutions (such as Morocco, Iran, or the Palestinian Authority) will reinforce the need to focus both on broad target groups (e.g., youth, women) and on themes which appear non-threatening but which have significant political content in the long run (e.g., education, community action, and tolerance).

In general, those devising a U.S. public diplomacy campaign targeted to Arab and Muslim-majority states (as well as to Muslim minorities elsewhere) should avoid two themes:

1. That Americans (even American Muslims) know Islam better than other Muslims do. It makes little sense for U.S. political leaders to preach to Middle Eastern Muslims that Osama bin Laden does not represent "true Islam." That message will resonate only if broadcast by moderate Muslim clerics within the societies in which listeners/viewers live. U.S. diplomacy should actively engage with local religious leaders to convince them (or cajole local political leaders to convince their own local religious leaders) to issue clear statements against extremism and violence, which will be much more powerful than protestations about Islam by U.S. politicians. (It is essential that such condemnations not be limited to the events of September 11; to be lasting and powerful, they should address all terrorism -- that is, all attacks on civilians, regardless of political context or alleged objective.) The more appropriate role for American Muslims in U.S. public diplomacy is to advertise the religious tolerance of U.S. society and the freedom within America to debate U.S. policy.

2. That America is keen to understand why so many in the region "hate us." While journalists are keen to hype the anti-Americanism of local populations, it is both self-defeating and analytically unproven to assume that large majorities in the Arab and/or Muslim worlds detest the United States. That many, probably most, Middle Easterners are critical of specific U.S. policies is neither new nor a surprise, given America's status as the sole superpower, arbiter of global culture, and engine of a globalization process in which the Middle East participates only marginally. At the same time, as the small but vocal and politically active class is avowedly anti-American, the large "silent majority" of Arabs and Muslims most likely relishes the idea of coming to America, knows little about the reality of American life, and is exposed only to the caricature of U.S. policies they see on local media. In short, there is a difference between opposition and hate, and to the extent they hate, they hate a phantom.

Exacerbating the challenge for U.S. policymakers is the fact that the most obvious and logical resource for public diplomacy to the Middle East -- that is, the professional class of U.S. experts on contemporary Middle East politics and society -- is generally (though not uniformly) hostile to U.S. Middle East policy. Most would cause more mischief than good should they be entrusted with creating and implementing a public diplomacy campaign. As a rule, seeking out scholars and policy practitioners who can provide a robust explanation of U.S. policy, even if they are not necessarily "Middle East experts," should be a higher priority than putting on display for Middle Easterners the diversity of U.S. views that is a hallmark of our democracy.

Robert Satloff is the executive director of The Washington Institute.

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