



## BRITAIN MUST FUND “STRATEGY FOR HEARTS AND MINDS” IN MIDDLE EAST

*Think-tank report calls for BBC Arabic TV service in region*

*Embargoed Wednesday 26 February 2003*

Britain must invest far more to win over “hearts and minds” in the Middle East to mitigate the damage done to our reputation in the region by an attack on Iraq, according to an independent report from the Foreign Policy Centre sponsored by the British Council. It calls on Britain and the US to shun propaganda and invest in programmes to build better relationships.

*Public Diplomacy in the Middle East*, by Mark Leonard and Conrad Smewing, argues that in the short-term Britain needs to differentiate itself from American foreign policy and counter suspicions that war is motivated by a “clash of civilizations”. In the longer-term it should work with Arab societies to encourage social and political reform.

The widespread perception that US/UK foreign policy are interchangeable should be challenged by British Ministers emphasising at every opportunity the differences that exist between their policies in the region - from the Israel/Palestine to the policy of engagement with Iran and Syria. The UK should be more openly critical of the policies of Ariel Sharon and be willing to “bloody the American’s noses” when discussing international attitudes to the peace process.

Instead of spending on promoting Britain, resources should be allocated to activities that will encourage social change in the Middle East. A massive expansion of Britain’s public diplomacy work in the region is proposed, including a bold target for the British Council to have direct contact with one in twenty people in the Arab and Muslim world, and for the BBC World Service to reach millions through its Arab language TV news channel. To avoid the inevitable accusations of “imperialism”, all assistance should be based on the UN’s human development agenda.

The report also argues that the Government should make it a priority to counter the ill-informed commentary about Islam in the UK that leads many in the Middle East to believe that Britain is motivated by a “clash of civilizations”. These misrepresentations, when transmitted back to the Arab world by correspondents in London or through reports on the views of the British media in Arab states, do enormous reputational damage. *Public Diplomacy and the Middle East* calls on British Embassies abroad to demonstrate that the British Government cares about the misreporting of Arab societies by contacting journalists and writing letters for publication to correct factual errors.

### ANALYSIS:

- **Polls show that Britain’s reputation in the Middle East has declined because of its foreign policy.** In the British Council’s *Connecting Futures Survey*, when respondents were asked to name the negative aspects of the UK, 37% named its political stance. The closeness of the UK to the US was the most frequently cited factor in its falling standing.

**For briefings, interviews or a copy of the pamphlet,  
call Rob Blackhurst on 0207 401 5355/ 0787 9423341**

# The Foreign Policy Centre **Press Release**

*New Directions in Global Thinking*

- **Propaganda doesn't work:** Many high profile US public diplomacy efforts have proved counter-productive, concentrating "almost exclusively on broadcasting as loudly as possible its openness and love of dialogue, rather than actually engaging in it". The creation of a youth friendly Arabic media station, over which the State Department retains editorial control, has given international broadcasting "a reputation for propaganda" whilst videos of Muslims living happy lives in the US fail to address concerns about foreign policy.
- **There is no "clash of civilizations", though there are fears that the West is motivated by such a clash. Economic success is admired and democratic values are shared:** 51 per cent of older youths expressed a desire to emigrate to other countries, according to the UN's Human Development report. A higher percentage (around 88%) of Muslims approved of the statement "I approve of democratic ideals" than Western Christians - higher, in fact, than all other religious groups. 55% of Arabs are favourable to American "freedom and democracy". However, the proposition that the West respects Islamic values attracts no support. According to polling evidence from Gallup, Turkey and Morocco recorded figures of 5% and 4% respectively.
- **Hostility in the Arab World is exacerbated by anti-Islamic sentiment in the west:** Polls show that the US public dislike Lebanon, Indonesia, Turkey and Iran more than the public in those countries dislike the US. Remarks like President Bush's recent claim that "there is a single, sustainable model of human progress" are leading audiences to "switch off and reject everything we say" in the Middle East.
- **Dislike of real policies in the Middle East is mixed with conspiracy theories. Statements made by public figures in the West are confused with official Government policy:** Sixty one per cent of respondents in a Gallup poll of nine Muslim countries were unwilling to accept that Arabs or Muslims could have been responsible for the 11 September attacks. There were consistently voiced suspicions that the United States itself or *Mossad*, the Israeli security service, were in fact responsible. Recently, the description of Saudi Arabia as "the kernel of evil" by a member of the RAND thinktank in Washington was interpreted as an insight into the Bush administration's view.

## **Selected Recommendations:**

### **Changes to the UK presence in the Middle East:**

- **The BBC should be funded to establish an Arab language TV service.** According to polling, the BBC is trusted more than the domestic media in Arab countries. The BBC World Service's Trust for training journalists should also be expanded in the Middle East.
- **The British Council should prioritise allowing women access to their online English teaching resources.** Much of the difficulty surrounding British Council operation in a country like Saudi Arabia flows from the fact that its work is carried out in the public sphere. By moving online, the Council allows easier access to large numbers of women in their home. This will allow educated Saudi women to engage more directly in public affairs.

**For briefings, interviews or a copy of the pamphlet,  
call Rob Blackhurst on 0207 401 5355/ 0787 9423341**



- **The Foreign Office should employ local spokesmen to liaise with the media, make statements and appear on television programmes.** In Britain they should also increase their efforts to recruit Muslim staff in the UK.
- **The Foreign Office should conduct a complete review of its visa practices, with their public diplomacy impact in mind.** In Turkey and Saudi Arabia, the Visa process is increasing bad feeling about the UK.

### Changes in the UK:

- **The Government should assemble a task-force to produce teaching material on Islam as a religion,** the Middle East and West for use in Western education systems
- **A Home Office press team for Arab media should be established to place in context UK domestic stories** that damage Britain's reputation in the Middle East. Negative sentiment is whipped up by disproportionate coverage of the election of BNP councillors or grossly exaggerated estimates of the number of Muslims being interned under anti-terrorism legislation, which are presented as representative of British society. The Government should also be ready to attack **poor reporting standards** in Britain when basic errors about Islam or Arab countries are made

### Mark Leonard said:

"It might seem an odd time to trying to win over hearts and minds in the Middle East as the troops are assembling and bombs preparing to fly. But this is exactly the time for suspicions and hatred between the West and the Middle East to tackled with far greater effort and resources than ever before"

### NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. *Public Diplomacy in the Middle East* is strictly embargoed until Wednesday 26 February 2003.
2. The Foreign Policy Centre is an independent thinktank established in 1998 by then Foreign Secretary Robin Cook (President) and Tony Blair (Patron).
3. *Public Diplomacy and the Middle East* is sponsored by the British Council. The views expressed are those of the authors alone.

**For briefings, interviews or a copy of the pamphlet,  
call Rob Blackhurst on 0207 401 5355/ 0787 9423341**