

# The Unintended Consequences of Crisis Public Diplomacy:

## American Public Diplomacy in the Arab World

R.S. Zaharna, American University | June 2003

With the end of major military action in Iraq, U.S. public diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim world has entered a new, more challenging phase. In the post-September 11 phase of U.S. public diplomacy, America was the undeniable victim of a terrorist attack. That image fit with the underlying message of America's war on terrorism, namely, "join us in fighting evil aggression against innocent civilians." Even still, America's public diplomacy initiative failed. Now, with the U.S.-led military action in Iraq, America is no longer perceived as the victim but rather as the aggressor. If selling Washington's message was tough before, it just got infinitely harder. Before embarking on a new diplomacy phase, it is critical to understand what went wrong in the first.

The first phase of the current American public diplomacy was heralded in with great fanfare almost immediately after September 11.

### Key Points

- The U.S. has entered a new, more challenging phase of public diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim world.
- The first phase of U.S. public diplomacy, which was heralded in with such fanfare immediately after September 11, has backfired.
- Unless Washington officials address why initial public diplomacy efforts failed, they may produce the same result but with greater consequences.

The terrorist attack on America was a wake-up call for many in Washington about the importance of public diplomacy. As Congressman Henry Hyde noted, "the perceptions of foreign publics have domestic consequences." President Bush echoed the sense of urgency when he said: "We have to do a better job of telling our story."

Within days of the 9/11 attack, Secretary of State Colin Powell suddenly answered a longstanding invitation to appear on *Al-*

*Jazeera*, the Arab satellite news channel. In less than a month, on October 2, veteran advertising executive Charlotte Beers was sworn in as the new undersecretary of state for public affairs and public diplomacy. In November, the House held its first hearings on public diplomacy. According to Beers and the other experts who testified, the problem was that the world did not know or understand America. Thus, the first priority of U.S. public diplomacy was to inform the world about U.S. policies and values.

Efforts focused on the Arab and Muslim world. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice

followed Secretary Powell's lead and also agreed to interviews on *Al-Jazeera*. The State Department compiled evidence linking Al Qaeda and the 9/11 attack into a brochure, "The Network of Terrorism." A new website and a series of ads about Muslim life were created to emphasize the "shared values" between America and Muslims. New Arabic, Farsi, Dari, and Pashto-language radio stations were launched, and plans were developed for an Arabic-language television network.

The U.S. Congress and administration similarly intensified their efforts. Congress passed the new "Freedom Promotion Act of 2002," which injected \$497 million annually into the budget of public diplomacy. First the Pentagon, then the White House, established special offices to help reach public diplomacy goals.

With such a concerted effort at the highest levels aimed at winning the hearts and minds of Arabs, Washington officials expected increased support in the Arab and Muslim world. That didn't happen. Despite more than a year of intensive public diplomacy aimed specifically at the Muslim and Arab world, study after study from November 2001 to December 2002 showed U.S. support steadily declining.

On February 27, 2003, appearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Undersecretary Beers described the gap between how America sees itself and how others see America as "frighteningly wide." Regarding the Muslim world, Beers was even more graphic: "... millions of ordinary people ... have gravely distorted but carefully cultivated images of us—images so negative, so weird, so hostile that I can assure you a young generation of terrorists is being created." The next week, Beers resigned her position—for health reasons. America's public diplomacy initiative had clearly backfired.

In March, when America's war on terrorism led to U.S. military action in Iraq, support for America plummeted. According to a newly released study by the Pew Charitable Trust, anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world has intensified and spread. In several Arab countries, more than 90% hold an unfavorable view of the U.S., and negative perceptions have spread from the Muslim countries in the Middle East to Indonesia in the Far East and Nigeria in Africa.

Public diplomacy may not have been the only answer to the post-9/11 crisis, but it was an important tool. The problem is, it backfired. The critical question remains: What went wrong? How did American public diplomacy result in decreased support in the Arab and Muslim world?



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# Problems with Current U.S. Policy

The immediate explanation for declining Arab support for the U.S. would appear to be America's war on terrorism. But the whole purpose of public diplomacy is to garner support for policies, even for unpopular policies and even from skeptical foreign publics. To be effective, public diplomacy must work not only in times of peace but also in times of conflict. Two other factors loom much larger in explaining the failure of public diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim worlds: credibility and culture.

The credibility problem derives from the fact that many in the Middle East perceive a sharp contradiction between the words of U.S. public diplomacy and the actions of U.S. foreign policy. This discrepancy between America's words and actions creates a credibility problem that can discredit even the best campaign.

The other key factor, which typically receives less emphasis, is culture. Not all public diplomacy problems are communication problems, but effective communication can help resolve policy and credibility issues. The fact that Washington's communication backfired with foreign audiences points to culture as the primary culprit. Different cultural styles of communicating often produce opposite and unintended results.

Ironically, U.S. officials may have been so focused on studying their audience's culture that they neglected the influence of their own. U.S. public diplomacy very much reflects a uniquely American style of communication, public relations, and advertising. While the American public responded positively to the style, the Arab and Muslim publics, who have a different culture and style entirely, responded negatively or not at all. Several examples stand out.

First, U.S. public diplomacy focused on getting America's message out. This information-centered approach parallels the "information overload" syndrome found in America, where communication problems are solved by the supply of information. The Arab world has a more relationship-centered view of communication. Rather than focusing on one-way message strategies to inform people, the Arab culture tends to use two-way, relationship building strategies to connect people. America's information-centered goal resulted in a flood of information that was neatly packaged but which failed to connect with the Arab people.

Second, American public diplomacy relied heavily on the mass media to get the U.S. message out to the most people in the least time. In the Arab world, meeting people face to face may not be the most efficient means of communicating, but it is the most effective, and interpersonal channels are preferred. Besides, the Arab media does not have a stellar history of credibility and trust with its public. Thus, relying on the mass media to communicate with the Arab and Muslim worlds is likely to prove both ineffective and counterproductive.

For example, Washington officials were repeatedly shocked by the tenacity of rumors when the U.S. attacked the Taliban in Afghanistan. Despite a rapid response team of U.S. spokespersons covering the news cycle from Karachi to Washington, vicious rumors persisted. Rumors speak to the advantage that social networks have over the media in spreading information; misperceptions speak to the advantage that interpersonal communication has over mass communication regarding credibility.

The State Department's multi-million-dollar advertising campaign promoting Muslim life in America failed for the same reason. Television advertisements cannot compete with personal phone calls from Muslims and Arabs in America about the immigration and discrimination problems they have faced in the U.S. since September 11, 2001.

America's style relied on facts and evidence as the primary persuasive tools in making the case against Saddam Hussein and Osama bin Laden. For most Americans, the facts speak for themselves. For most people in the Muslim world, impersonal facts ring hollow, while metaphors and analogies persuade. Not coincidentally, the dominant persuasive devices found in the *Holy Quran* are analogies, metaphors, and rhetorical questions. These are the tools bin Laden wields so effectively.

Directness is another stylistic difference. President Bush's penchant for "speaking straight" communicated a resolve that most Americans cheered. In many Muslim countries, such directness in public settings is perceived as confrontational, threatening the recipient's public face as well as its collective social fabric.

Finally, many of the message appeals also missed the mark. One outstanding example was Washington's attempts to show how the war on terror was not a war on Islam by emphasizing U.S. efforts to help Muslims in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. Emphasizing one's good deeds is a coveted practice in U.S. public relations. Washington officials were naturally confused and offended by apparent Muslim ingratitude. However, for most Muslims, calling attention to one's charity or good deeds is frowned upon. The *Quran* admonishes, "cancel not your charity by reminders of your generosity or injury."

In general, U.S. officials appear to have overlooked culture as an inherent feature of public diplomacy, viewing the problem as a lack of information, and lamenting that "people don't know about us." U.S. public diplomacy got the message out but had no control over how it was interpreted. In some cases, efforts by administration officials to explain U.S. policies were as offensive as the policies themselves.

Since the American communication style elicits such a positive response from the American public, Washington officials were at a loss to explain why their best efforts were failing and the U.S. image was spiraling downward.

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## Key Problems

- American public diplomacy is not culturally neutral but reflects a uniquely American style of communicating.
  - While the American style of communicating positively resonates with the American public, it negatively resonates or fails to resonate with the Arab and Muslim publics.
  - Cultural differences in public communication styles undermined the effectiveness of American public diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim world.
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# Toward a New Foreign Policy

Culture, combined with the crisis America faced, produced the unintended consequences of U.S. public diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim world. The post-9/11 phase of U.S. public diplomacy was, in effect, crisis public diplomacy. Unlike traditional public diplomacy, which enjoys the luxury of time to cultivate favorable publics individually, crisis public diplomacy entails communicating simultaneously with multiple audiences—including hostile ones—in a rapidly changing, highly visible, and politically competitive communication environment.

American officials appeared to overlook the immediacy and glare of the international media that crises engender. U.S. officials tried to communicate with foreign publics as if they were separate from

## Key Recommendations

- Culture, combined with crisis, produced the unintended consequences of U.S. public diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim world.
- The challenge of effective public diplomacy is bridging cultural differences, so that an administration's communication style positively resonates with domestic and foreign publics.
- As the promise of U.S. liberators fades into the reality of U.S. occupiers in Iraq, the Arab world conjures up highly negative and emotionally charged images of Israel's military occupation of Palestine.

the American public. Such a distinction between foreign and domestic publics has become purely hypothetical. In today's global and instantaneous communication environment, a nation can no longer separate its domestic public from foreign publics. What one hears, everyone hears.

American efforts to intensify its public diplomacy may have inadvertently magnified misunderstandings and tensions between America and the Arab and Muslim worlds. Although both the domestic

and foreign publics heard the same message, both interpreted it differently. When America amplified its message through stronger language and more vigorous dissemination, American domestic support grew and foreign support weakened. The more America intensified its public diplomacy efforts—using an American style—the greater the gap became between the domestic and foreign publics.

This gap may have been widened by Washington's need to gain and solidify American domestic support. During times of conflict, rallying domestic support often means identifying a foreign enemy. If the foreign public identifies with the foreign enemy, efforts to demonize the enemy only further alienate the foreign audience and widen the gap between the domestic and foreign publics.

As the U.S. embarks on a new round of public diplomacy, the challenge is how to span cultural barriers, so America's public communication positively resonates with the domestic and foreign publics. Meeting this challenge requires that U.S. officials not only coordinate their message among America's many spokespersons but also harmonize communication with America's many publics. The two must go hand in hand.

If there was a success in the first round of U.S. public diplomacy, achieving coordination was it. America's initial public diplomacy efforts highlighted the need for coordination. Disputes within the administration were producing conflicting messages. However, by the time the U.S. entered Iraq, all officials were speaking with one powerful voice.

Now that the U.S. occupies Iraq, the problem of coordination has reemerged. When the U.S. military entered Iraq, it became the new face of American public diplomacy. U.S. troops are now both the medium and the message of U.S. public diplomacy in the region.

In this respect, the U.S. military is at a distinct disadvantage. The promise of America as a "liberator" is rapidly fading into the reality of U.S. troops as "occupiers." Americans tend to have a historically positive view of military occupation; the U.S. occupation of Germany and Japan helped transform both into world economic powers. In the Arab and Muslim world, military occupation conjures up highly negative and emotionally charged images of the Israeli military occupation of Palestinian land. These images are fertile ground for rumors, stereotypes, and fears. Already one can substitute photo captions from the U.S. military occupation in Iraq, such as the walking patrols and checkpoints, with those of the Israeli military occupation in Gaza. The more entrenched these images become, the more difficult they will be to remove later.

American credibility, matching words about Iraq with deeds in Iraq, will be closely monitored. Given the presence of U.S. troops, it is important that the Bush administration's public statements correspond to the actual situation in Iraq. Credibility and public diplomacy effectiveness will not be measured by mass media efficiency but rather by the tenor of the personal stories circulating during the evening social visits among Iraqi families and neighbors.

Harmonizing America's communication with its internal and external publics will be equally challenging and will require large doses of cultural awareness. The effort to be more culturally attuned will entail fewer Washington-driven initiatives that sound good at home and more field-driven initiatives that work well abroad. Also, implementing some of the institutional recommendations proposed by the Council on Foreign Relations and the U.S. Information Agency Alumni Association may help make U.S. public diplomacy more responsive, flexible, and proactive in the region. Through a dual approach—coordinating communication internally and harmonizing it externally—U.S. officials can avoid the unintended consequences of crisis public diplomacy.

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# Sources for More Information

## Websites

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<http://www.diplomacy.edu/>

### GlobalPac: Supporting Public Diplomacy

<http://www.globalpac.org/>

### Public Diplomacy Web Site (sponsored by U.S. Information Agency Alumni Association and The Public Diplomacy Council)

<http://www.publicdiplomacy.org/>

### U.S. Advisory Commission for Public Diplomacy

<http://www.state.gov/t/adcompd/>

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