

## 12

**Fixing  
Public  
Diplomacy  
for Arab  
and Muslim  
Audiences**

William A. Rugh

The phrase “American public diplomacy” means, as it has meant for decades, U.S. government programs intended to support our national interests by providing information and interpretation to foreign audiences about matters relating to the United States. Unlike traditional diplomacy, which is essentially confined to intergovernmental relations, the target audience of public diplomacy is primarily nongovernmental foreign opinion leaders in the media, academia, and elsewhere.

For more than forty years, from 1958 to 1999, the primary responsibility for American public diplomacy was lodged in the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). In 1999, President Clinton decided to transfer this responsibility to the U.S. Department of State. It is true that many other government agencies, as well as many private organizations and individuals, have an impact on American public diplomacy programs when foreign audiences become aware of American actions and opinions

146 William A. Rugh

reported in the public domain. In these days of expanding international media technology and volume, it is fair to say that the percentage of nongovernmental communications that affect the conduct of public diplomacy is growing. Nonetheless, the management of public diplomacy is strictly the State Department's responsibility, and the fact that State Department views are known to express U.S. government policy makes those views more significant than nearly all other sources of American opinion and interpretation available to foreign audiences.

### **The New Problem of Public Diplomacy**

How should America's public diplomacy problem with Arabs in particular and the Muslim world as a whole be defined? The most urgent question for Americans today is a very specific one: How can significant Arab and Muslim support for, or acquiescence to, terrorism be counteracted? Looked at closely, that support is of a relatively narrow sort.

Recent polls show that the overwhelming majority of Arab opinion of the United States is positive toward American values and essentially all aspects of American culture and society—with the sole exception of American foreign policy. Most Arabs admire American society and U.S. leadership in science, technology, and economics. Many who are able to do so want to send their children to American universities. But Arabs are invariably critical of U.S. foreign policy, and nearly all Muslims tend to share similar views about U.S. foreign policy.<sup>1</sup>

Arab and Muslim criticism of U.S. foreign policy has

1. Polls reported by James J. Zogby, "What Arabs Think," Zogby International (September 2002), and Shibley Telhami, *The Stakes* (Boulder: Westview, 2002), 46–49.

## Fixing Public Diplomacy for Arab and Muslim Audiences 147

increased over the past half century, and particularly in recent years. The reasons seem fairly obvious. American involvement in the Middle East was minimal before World War II, when that involvement was confined primarily to work by educators and oilmen who, in general, were regarded as bringing benefits to the region. Strong Arab nationalist sentiment in the 1950s and 1960s increasingly focused negative attention on American support for Israel, as Arabs believed that Washington was unfairly taking the wrong side in the Arab-Israeli dispute. Most Arabs and Muslims, however, continued to respect most aspects of American society and culture. Also, since pious Muslims believed communism to be a threat to Islam, America's stance against communism tended to reinforce positive attitudes toward the United States.

Since September 11, criticism of American policy has steadily increased. For the majority of Arabs and Muslims, the immediate reaction to the September 11 attack was sympathy for Americans as victims. The Arab world tended to understand the U.S. military invasion of Afghanistan and the elimination of the Taliban regime as an act of legitimate self-defense. They also regarded President Bush's initial declaration of war against terrorism as justified. As the president expanded the definition of "the enemy" beyond al Qaeda, Arabs and Muslims concluded that Bush's perception of the problem, and of the enemy, differed substantially from theirs.

Washington issued a list of terrorist organizations that was limited to Arab and Muslim groups, including, for example, Hizballah, an organization that is considered a legitimate political party in Lebanon with representatives in parliament. President Bush declared that any state not fighting terrorism was as bad as the terrorists themselves, and when American commentators writing in the press blamed Saudi Arabia and Egypt

148 William A. Rugh

for not doing enough to counter terrorism, Saudis and Egyptians felt unfairly criticized. They replied that they had been combating terrorism for years before September 11, detaining or deporting terrorists acting against their governments. Also, as the violence between Palestinians and Israelis continued, it seemed to Arabs and Muslims that President Bush was unfairly siding with Israel and blaming only the Palestinians. Some argued and more believed that Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon had hijacked Bush's war on terrorism for his own purposes. President Bush's subsequent linking of Iran and Iraq with North Korea as an "axis of evil" also ran counter to the trend that had developed in the Arab world to effect reconciliation with Iran and Iraq.

Washington's confrontation with Iraq, followed by the coalition's invasion, was widely opposed by Arabs and Muslims, because they did not regard Iraq as a threat to them and because they resented outside intervention. Moreover, the war seemed to them further evidence of American hostility toward Arabs and Islam, and of a dangerous willingness to use force over the objections of others. Their satisfaction in seeing Saddam Hussein toppled was undercut by increased feelings of humiliation and weakness against the lone superpower acting without soliciting or caring about their views. Unlike 1991, when the first President Bush had support from most of the Arab and Muslim world in ending the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, President George W. Bush was widely seen as imposing a new occupation on Iraq for parochial U.S. interests.

All of these American policy behaviors seem to most Arabs and Muslims to be anti-Muslim, despite the fact that President Bush, from time to time, has said he respects Islam and has repeatedly denied that the war on terrorism is either a clash of civilizations or a war against Islam. But post-September 11 American security measures having to do with visa proce-

## Fixing Public Diplomacy for Arab and Muslim Audiences 149

dures, as well as comments critical of Islam by people like Jerry Falwell, Frank Graham, and the occasional U.S. Army officer—comments immediately conveyed to audiences abroad by CNN, Fox, and foreign media—have reinforced the impression among Arabs and Muslims that the American government and its people have turned hostile. Since September 11, the gap between the Arab perception of the world and that of Washington has steadily increased, leading to an unprecedented level of tension between the two sides.

President Bush's endorsement after the Iraq War of a new "road map" for Arab-Israeli peace was welcomed by many Arabs as a sign of American interest in helping resolve the Arab's self-declared highest-priority issue. The welcome, however, was tempered by deep skepticism that the president possessed neither the evenhandedness nor the resolve necessary to broker a settlement, mainly because, up to that point, his policies on many issues had severely undermined American credibility in the eyes of most Arabs and Muslims.

### **Who Is the Target of Public Diplomacy?**

With all this as background, we can see that the highest-priority problem for the United States is, for the most part, restricted to foreign policy issues. Fanatical Islamists aside, most Arabs and Muslims do not hate America for what it is; they dislike America for what they think it does.

Beyond that, however, it is useful, for practical purposes, to regard Arab opinion as divided into three broad categories: friends who know us, enemies who sometimes know us and sometimes don't, and a vast middle of those who mostly don't care.

On one end of the spectrum are people who have spent time in the United States, as students or on business, and who

## 150 William A. Rugh

have a reasonably sophisticated understanding of America. These are people who know some or a lot of English, who have had access to American culture and its information environment, and who tend to be the most favorably disposed to this country. They have informed, moderate, and basically positive opinions of the United States, although they too have been critical of aspects of our foreign policy. They have given us the benefit of the doubt and even defended America in discussion with their compatriots.

At the opposite extreme is a small group of radicals who are highly critical of the United States, based primarily on fear and apprehension that American involvement in their part of the world threatens their culture. Most of these radicals know little of America and have never been to America. Some, however, have been radicalized by their experience in the West—in Europe and the United States. The majority of these radicals are literate, reasonably well-educated people by standards of the region. As a rule, they are not from poor families nor from families near the bottom of their local social hierarchy.

Arab radicals have opposed existing Arab regimes as well as the United States, and the extremists among them have tended to support the use of violence and terrorism for political ends. Although these radicals have been doing this for a long time, in earlier decades they were essentially secular and leftist in orientation. But since the 1980s, they have tended increasingly to use, and presumably believe in, an Islamic fundamentalist vocabulary.

The third group is a large silent majority that tends not to focus on America very much, unless events in the region, such as the Palestinian uprising or the Iraq War, bring America to the group's inescapable attention. Members of this group come from the lower rungs of society for the most part, where considerable percentages of people—more than half in

## Fixing Public Diplomacy for Arab and Muslim Audiences 151

Egypt—are either literally or functionally illiterate when it comes to political matters.

Since September 11, developments have tended to strengthen the radical group and to weaken the pro-American group. The members of the latter group have generally stopped speaking up in defense of the United States because public opinion has become so hostile. At the same time, recent events have raised the consciousness of the silent majority in ways unhelpful to American interests. Support for active opposition to America, and for terrorism, has increased among the radical minority, and others in the remaining two categories have become more reluctant to speak out against that support.

It is tempting to dismiss third world public opinion as irrelevant, and many do just that. But public opinion matters everywhere. Even rulers in authoritarian states pay careful attention to it. This is truer than ever since the growth of satellite television has eroded government controls over the information and opinion available to citizens. In the Arab world in particular, Arab satellite television that developed during the 1990s has amplified Arab voices throughout the Middle East, where local government-owned and Western media had previously dominated the discussion of international events.

It is also tempting to conclude that the only way to undermine foreign support for terrorism and to close the attitudinal gap between Washington and public opinion in the Arab and Muslim worlds would be for Washington to change its policies. Obviously, we should not change or abandon well-considered policies just because others abroad may not like them—whether because they misunderstand those policies (as is often the case in the Middle East) or because their interests genuinely conflict with our own. If that were to happen,

152 William A. Rugh

public diplomacy would become a decidedly secondary concern.

An additional problem is that President Bush, by his policies, has badly eroded American credibility abroad, causing foreign audiences to doubt his intentions. If his administration can lead a transformation of Iraq and Afghanistan into internationally recognized successes, and if it can bring about a stable resolution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, Arab and Muslim opinion would become more favorable. But the Arab world strongly doubts that he will succeed at any of this.

Yet even in lieu of foreign policy shifts or eventual policy successes, foreign opinion can be affected by a substantial public diplomacy effort that is well planned, systematic, and well targeted. In terms of the three groups here described, it is probably futile to try to convert the few extremists away from their anti-Americanism. It is possible, however, to work with and embolden those with pro-American views and, hence, to influence the great middle of Arab and Muslim opinion, which, thanks to new technologies, is gradually being brought into the public realm.

### **Tools of Public Diplomacy**

Decades of experience demonstrate that an effective public diplomacy program that efficiently provides relevant information about the United States and its policies must have a well-defined target audience, clear priorities for its substantive content, the most effective instruments and communication tools, and a structure of responsibility that ensures coordination. Let us briefly review these criteria as they pertain to the problem at hand.

First, as noted, the target audience should include two of the three groups mentioned above: the silent majority and



## Fixing Public Diplomacy for Arab and Muslim Audiences 153

friendly moderates who know and appreciate America and its values. Because it is impractical to reach all the members of those two groups, the major effort should be directed at each group's opinion leaders who are influential in their own societies today or who will be in the near future. The American effort should not try to directly target radical groups that are hostile to our values. We should leave that to others *within* the Arab and Muslim community, as they have a far better chance of effectively reaching the radicals than we do. For example, a moderate Muslim cleric with a following in his community should be a high-priority target because he can help deal with radicals and would-be radicals in terms that they understand. When appealing to moderate clerics, an important part of the message should be that it is in their own interest to keep radicals from controlling the agenda and the public discussion in their countries.

American public diplomacy priorities need to be based on an analysis of the major issues affecting Arab and Muslim opinion about America. Under current circumstances this means the highest priority should be given to explaining U.S. foreign policy and encouraging sympathetic understanding of it, because foreign policy is by far the most important source of criticism and misunderstanding of the United States today. In this context, it is important to note that although the foreign policies of the George W. Bush administration have been severely criticized abroad, they have enjoyed the support of large majorities of the American public and Congress. This huge disconnect between American and foreign opinion opens the door for the central function of public diplomacy to be activated, namely, to help explain to foreign audiences how Americans are thinking and why they support U.S. foreign policy. Arab and Muslim audiences should be told that the majority of American *society* supports U.S. foreign policies that

154 William A. Rugh

Arabs and Muslims oppose. The hope is that this will help open the Arab and Muslim community to new information and interpretation.

The second priority after foreign policy should be to provide information about basic characteristics of American society that are important for Arab and Muslim audiences to know and understand. In today's world, most of these audiences have access to large amounts of information about America through various channels. Indeed, at a basic informational level, they generally know much more about us than all but a tiny minority of Americans know about Arabs and Muslims.

Nevertheless, most Arabs and Muslims have important gaps in their knowledge of America—especially in terms of American government and politics. They may know from the media about our popular culture, and they may hear public statements by prominent personalities, but they tend to know little about our political system, such as the roles of Congress and the press, the court system, and the practical impact of the Bill of Rights. A broad program containing what USIA used to call “Americana” content is important in conveying an understanding of our foreign policy.

Recent American public diplomacy efforts, led until March 2003 by undersecretary of state Charlotte Beers, tended to give highest priority to Americana issues rather than to foreign policy. This is because policy under Beers focused primarily on those radical groups that hate American society and its values. Thus, considerable sums were spent on a film project showing how well Muslims were treated in America. This policy focused on the wrong target audience (the radicals), however, and did not sufficiently address the key foreign policy complaints that important audiences were expressing.

Before Beers' tenure, the Clinton administration gave

## Fixing Public Diplomacy for Arab and Muslim Audiences 155

insufficient attention to foreign policy advocacy—for example, on the question of our confrontation with Saddam Hussein during the 1990s. Arab opinion increasingly criticized the UN embargo as hurting only Iraqi citizens. The U.S. government did not aggressively make public the case for continuing our policy by showing how the sanctions policy was caused by the Iraqi government's behavior. We did not explain how that policy was being manipulated to harm those segments of Iraqi society that the Iraqi regime held to be potential dangers.

Experience shows that the key to effective public diplomacy is people. There should be a cadre of professionals in our diplomatic missions abroad who are experienced in techniques of policy advocacy and Americana explication, and who are in direct contact with our target audiences. In the Muslim and Arab worlds especially, the most effective way to influence opinions and convey information is in face-to-face dialogue. Edward R. Murrow famously said that in public diplomacy, "It is the last three feet that count." Other U.S. officials abroad, including U.S. ambassadors, are also in a position to carry out public diplomacy functions when they interact with media editors, academics, and other opinion leaders.

Unfortunately, the large budget cuts for public diplomacy after the end of the Cold War, followed by the 1999 merger of USIA into the State Department, have severely reduced the number of public diplomacy specialists and undercut effective coordination between Washington and U.S. embassies abroad. The budget fell in real terms by 21 percent from 1988 to 1998. The budget has increased slightly since September 11, but it is nowhere near earlier levels. As the Djerejian Report on public diplomacy emphasized, there is an absurdly low level of support for such a critical function.

The merger of USIA into the State Department has weakened the public diplomacy function rather than strengthening

156 William A. Rugh

it, as advocates had promised. Officers with experience in public diplomacy have less influence now and less control over programs, and public diplomacy positions are frequently filled with nonspecialists. In addition to the decline in funding, professionalism and cohesion have declined drastically. After the departure of Beers, the undersecretary for public diplomacy position was left vacant for nearly nine months—all during the recent war in Iraq and its daunting aftermath. Then Beers' replacement, Margaret Tutweiler, left the job after only a few months. The combination of resource scarcity and organizational weakness has been very harmful to the recent public diplomacy effort, at a time when that effort is needed more than ever.

The dual techniques of listening carefully to foreign opinion and engaging in dialogue are essential. For persuasion and conveying understanding, dialogue is a more powerful tool than monologue. Listening carefully to foreign opinion has the added benefit of showing respect for foreign concerns, a posture that, in itself, is likely to encourage a more rational dialogue and more moderate views. A public diplomacy professional must know what foreign audiences are thinking in matters relating to the United States. Monitoring editorials and headlines in foreign media and engaging in private discussions with key members of the foreign audience are absolutely necessary for understanding the depth of feelings and of matters that may not be clearly expressed in public forums. Most Americans would be surprised to learn how little attention U.S. policy makers pay to foreign media and that what is monitored is not systematically analyzed.

This is especially true of our efforts in the Muslim world. There is no adequate budget for it nor are there enough linguists to do this essential task. Similarly, Voice of America (VOA) call-in programs with American officials can deal effec-

## Fixing Public Diplomacy for Arab and Muslim Audiences 157

tively with foreign concerns, but these have been cut back since the 1999 merger.

Senior officials in Washington, starting with the president himself, have a significant impact on public diplomacy every time they make public statements. Yet very often, Washington officials speaking publicly are thinking about an American audience rather than a foreign one. In today's world of heavy media coverage and instant reporting, it is impossible, and unwise, to imagine that senior officials can speak only to a domestic audience. The daily briefings given at the White House and at the Departments of State and Defense are exchanges almost exclusively with American journalists asking questions that are on the minds of Americans. Rarely are the journalists sensitive to foreign opinions and concerns.

The president and other senior officials, including State Department and Pentagon briefers, must be kept aware of major issues that arise in foreign public opinion so that they can address any important misunderstandings or distortions that affect American interests. They need public diplomacy professionals to monitor and analyze foreign opinion and to report their findings so foreign opinion will be taken into account when policy decisions and statements are made. Sometimes this happens, notably when a particularly egregious mistake is made. For example, after President Bush referred to his war on terrorism as a "crusade," he was told that word was counterproductive for foreign audiences, so he did not repeat it. But Muslims remember, and it would be better had such a mistake not been made in the first place. For that, however, senior officials must be cognizant of the public diplomacy role they invariably play, and well-trained public diplomacy professionals must be there, in adequate numbers and properly placed, to do their work.

Finally, public diplomacy professionals must have an array

158 William A. Rugh

of communication tools that they can use to carry out their responsibilities. The following paragraphs cover the most important tools for the current circumstances.

A well-designed exchange-of-persons program can be a powerful support for American public diplomacy, again because face-to-face encounters have proven to be the most effective. Scholarships, such as Fulbrights and others, that make it possible for Arab and Muslim students, scholars, and others to come to the United States are extremely valuable means to educate those audiences about all aspects of America. Such programs do not always produce friends, of course. But they produce far more friends than avowed enemies, and knowledgeable critics are usually easier to deal with than ignorant ones.

Similarly, Americans sent abroad to study or lecture can be very helpful. The participants must be carefully chosen to ensure that they are fair-minded. It has been the wise practice not to tell American scholars what to say and for them to tolerate a certain amount of criticism of America because that usually enhances their credibility and effectiveness. Also, Arab Americans and American Muslims can often explain America abroad most effectively, just as the late Alistair Cook used to explain America on the BBC to British audiences.

Accurate, up-to-date, factual information about U.S. policy and developments in American society and culture is also essential to public diplomacy professionals. They must have information if they are to present it effectively to foreign audiences. Accuracy and truthfulness are keys to maintaining credibility in public diplomacy.<sup>2</sup> Officers at embassies abroad depend on daily transmissions from Washington containing

2. In contrast, "propaganda" is usually defined as advocacy that can use lies and distortions and that need not be attributed.

## Fixing Public Diplomacy for Arab and Muslim Audiences 159

texts of U.S. statements, policy guidance messages, excerpts from American media, and reports on developments in the United States. They pass this information to target audiences based on current audience interests, drawing special attention to materials that are helpful.

Publications written for Arab and Muslim audiences can also be helpful tools, especially if they are in local languages. There used to be many such publications, but Congress cut the public diplomacy budget after the Cold War so that most were forced to go out of print. The State Department has revived the idea of magazines in Arabic aimed at Arab readers, which is a most welcome development.

The Voice of America, too, is an important public diplomacy tool because its programs are specifically designed for foreign audiences. Unfortunately, two recent developments have weakened its impact. For many years, VOA was required to follow State Department policy guidance, but under the Clinton administration, this link was broken so that VOA no longer functions in coordination with the government's public diplomacy professionals. This was a mistake; it should be fixed.

Then in 2002, the VOA Arabic service, which for decades had carried extensive policy-relevant and Americana material to a wide range of Arab audiences, was replaced by Radio Sawa, which mostly plays music for young people, severely reducing the effectiveness of our broadcasting in public diplomacy terms. Although Radio Sawa may be useful in some ways, it does not replace more serious broadcasts. There is no reason that we should be limited to sponsoring only one radio broadcast in Arabic. Radio stations are inexpensive, all things considered, especially when compared with the cost of fighter aircraft or tanks.

Gaining access to foreign media for helpful American

160 William A. Rugh

material and for interviews with U.S. officials has also proven to be a vital means for reaching the largest numbers of target audience members with the greatest credibility and impact. Again, personal contact with the editors of foreign media is often what persuades them to carry materials and commentaries helpful to understanding the United States. Rather than boycotting al-Jazeera and other Arab media because they carry hostile attacks on the United States, we should seek more access to them. Secretary of State Powell was wise to appear on al-Jazeera; however, very blunt, if private, pressure on the Qatari government to exercise more control over al-Jazeera may be less wise. The U.S. government should not be insisting that other governments censor their media, particularly not in the midst of a campaign to advance democracy in the Arab world.

Several other tools have also proven useful in the past and should be sharpened. One involves overseas libraries and book translations, as suggested in the Djerejian Report. Because these programs take a great deal of time and only pay off in the longer run, however, they should currently be given lower priority due to the urgency of closing the gap with the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Finally, as suggested previously, public diplomacy must have the appropriate organization and adequate funding to be effective. After the end of the Cold War, funding for American public diplomacy declined too fast and too far. This was a terrible mistake. Spending cuts mandated by Congress have reduced the number of public diplomacy professionals working abroad, reduced educational exchange programs, closed libraries, canceled vernacular language magazines, and hampered other efforts. This did not have to happen. The 1999 merger of USIA into the State Department fragmented public diplomacy and undermined it as a profession. The merger did



## Fixing Public Diplomacy for Arab and Muslim Audiences 161

not have to have those consequences, but it did. The coherence and professionalism of the public diplomacy function should be restored, if not by recreating USIA, then by elevating and consolidating it within the State Department. For the future of American foreign policy, it is urgent that we use proven techniques and that we find a better coordinated system and increased funding for public diplomacy for Arab and Muslim audiences.