

Winning Round Two:

American Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim Worlds

By R.S. Zaharna | June 13, 2003

According to a poll released early last week by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (<http://people-press.org/>), America's image has become "dangerously" negative throughout the Arab and Muslim world. Ironically, this follows an intensive public diplomacy initiative aimed specifically at the region. How did America's battle for the hearts and minds of the Arabs and Muslims wind up alienating the very people Washington was trying to reach?

Many in Washington are struggling to find an answer. On June 6, the State Department appointed Edward Djerejian, former ambassador to Syria, to lead a team of experts to improve America's communication with Arabs and Muslims. But before we begin the second round of public diplomacy, it may be helpful to review what went wrong in the first.

Lessons From Round One

The immediate explanation for the declining support is America's war on terrorism that culminated with the American-led military action in Iraq. However, the purpose of public diplomacy is to garner support for policies, even 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. During times of conflict, support is even more imperative.

Another explanation is American credibility. Many throughout the region perceive a mismatch between the words of American public diplomacy and the actions of American foreign policy. This discrepancy between America's words and actions creates a serious credibility problem that can undermine even the best campaign.

While not all public diplomacy problems are "communication problems," communication can help

resolve policy and credibility issues. Public diplomacy may not have been the answer to the post-September 11th crisis, but it was an important tool. The problem is, it didn't work.

The idea that American public communication backfired with foreign audiences suggests a primary culprit: culture. Rather than being culturally neutral, American public diplomacy reflects a uniquely American cultural style of communicating. While effective with the American public, this style failed with Arab and Muslim publics. In some cases, efforts by American officials to explain American policy were as offensive as the policy itself.

First, the goal of American public diplomacy focused on getting America's message out. This information-centered goal parallels the "information overload" syndrome found in America, where communication problems are seen and solved by 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, 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 that failed to connect with the people.



Second, American public diplomacy relied heavily on the mass media to get Washington's message out to the most people in the least time. Americans' emphasis on communication efficiency, as well as a relatively long and trusting relationship with the mass media, make the mass media the most efficient and effective medium for communicating with the American public. In the Arab world, meeting people face to face may not be the most efficient means of communicating, but it is the most effective. Interpersonal channels are not only preferred, but the Arab mass media does not have a stellar history of credibility and trust with its public. Accordingly, relying on the mass media may be ineffective, if not counterproductive.

American officials were repeatedly shocked by the tenacity of rumors when America went after the Taliban in Afghanistan. Despite setting up a rapid response team of American spokespersons to cover the news cycle from Karachi to Washington, vicious rumors persisted. Rumors speak to the power that social networks have over the media to spread information. The misperceptions speak to the credibility that interpersonal communication has over the mass media.

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 here after Sept. 11.

Similarly, the American style uses facts and evidence as its primary tools of persuasion. Each time Secretary Colin Powell appeared before the UN, he forcefully detailed the facts of America's case against Saddam Hussein. 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 ques-

tions. 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 one's public face as well as the collective social fabric.

Finally, many of the appeals found in American messages missed the mark. One outstanding example was American attempts to show how the "war on terror" was not a "war on Islam" by emphasizing America's help to Muslims in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. Emphasizing "one's good" is a coveted practice in American public relations. American officials were naturally confused, and some offended by the apparent 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."

Missing Culture

These are but a few of the subtle, yet powerful cultural differences that distinguish American public communication from that in the Arab and Muslim world. Because the American style elicits such a positive response with the American public, American officials were at a loss to explain why their best efforts were failing and America's image was spiraling downward. Many were understandably frustrated. However, seldom do different styles of communicating resonate the same with different cultures.

American officials appear to have overlooked culture as an inherent feature of public diplomacy, and in the process, inadvertently magnified misunderstandings and tensions between America and the Arab and Muslim worlds. Because of the open nature of public diplomacy, a nation can no longer separate its domestic public from foreign publics. What one hears, the other hears. When America amplified its

message through stronger language and more vigorous dissemination, American domestic support grew and foreign support weakened—same message, opposite reactions. The more America intensified its public diplomacy efforts—using an American style—the greater the gap became between America’s domestic and foreign publics.

The problem may have been exacerbated by America’s crisis management strategy. During times of conflict, rallying domestic support often means identifying a foreign enemy. If a foreign public identifies with the “foreign enemy,” efforts to demonize the enemy will only further alienate the foreign public. The Pew study bears this out.

As America embarks on a new round of public diplomacy, the challenge is how to cross the cultural barriers so America’s public communication positively resonates with its domestic and foreign publics. Meeting this challenge requires that American public diplomacy coordinate America’s message among its many spokespersons and harmonize America’s communication with its many publics. The two go hand in hand.

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

However, now that America is in Iraq, the problem of coordination has re-emerged. When the American military entered Iraq, it became the new face of American public diplomacy in the region. American troops are now both the medium and the message. America’s credibility, matching words about Iraq with deeds in Iraq, will be closely monitored. Such scrutiny will require even greater coordination between the Pentagon and State Department, but the two have had much practice.

Harmonizing America’s communication with its internal and external publics will be more challenging and require large doses of cultural awareness. Just as culture appears to shape the communication of a people, so culture shapes the public diplomacy of a nation. Ironically, American officials may have been so focused on studying their audience’s culture that they neglected the influence of their own. Being more attuned to culture may mean less Washington-driven initiatives that sound good here, and more field-driven initiatives that work well there.

Few can envy the public diplomacy task Ambassador Djerejian faces. But then, as a veteran diplomat, he may find the dual goals of coordinating America’s communication internally and harmonizing it externally, very much in keeping with his expertise. Public diplomacy, like traditional diplomacy, is more about building relationships than sending out messages.

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