

CREATIVITY AND PATIENCE: PUBLIC DIPLOMACY POST-SEPT. 11

The terrorist attacks on the U.S. of Sept. 11, 2001, jolted Americans with the realization that young men filled with hatred of the U.S. could, with limited training and guidance, become focused instruments of mass terror, willing and able to kill thousands of Americans. Soon thereafter, Americans grew more aware of another baffling fact: prevailing sentiment in the Arab and Muslim world explained away the attacks in an absurd collection of conspiracy theories, and viewed them as an inevitable, even justifiable, reaction to American hegemony.

True, there were only a few instances of outright celebration over the events of Sept. 11 in the streets of the Arab and Muslim world, and few serious public demonstrations following the launch of Operation Enduring Freedom in October. And most Arab and Muslim governments and wide segments of the population expressed horror at the attacks and sympathy for the victims. Those who knew us mourned, and our embassies overseas received heartfelt expressions of shock and sympathy from governments and publics alike.

Yet the general public reaction in the Arab-Muslim world highlighted a problem that has festered for over a decade: a deep and abiding resentment of the United States. This is clear to anyone who reads the Arab press, or watches television coverage of street demonstrations in Pakistan or Indonesia. It leaves most Americans puzzled — how can such large segments of the world sympathize with terrorists, lionize Osama bin Laden, and exhibit such

hatred of the U.S.? *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman accurately described the current situation as “an iron curtain of misunderstanding separating America and the Arab-Muslim world.” The challenge to U.S. public diplomacy is to break through that iron curtain.

The Engine of Anti-Americanism

The current state of affairs did not just erupt on Sept. 11, of course. It has been developing over a period of years following the end of the Cold War, during which the U.S. has become predominant in the realms of economy, popular culture, and political and military affairs. Abiding resentment of the U.S. has helped generate ideas believed so strongly and widely in the Arab-Muslim world that they are accepted as self-evident truths: the U.S. is anti-Islam; the U.S. conspires to keep Arabs and Muslims disunited and weak; the U.S. supports any injustice as long as it is in its political and economic interests; and the U.S. is a well-spring of disrespect for religion and the destruction of families and communities.

These concepts are the engine of anti-U.S. terrorism. As the Sept. 11 attacks showed us, widespread misunderstanding and resentment can be deftly manipulated by ruthless individuals, preying on a plentiful supply of young people drifting through societies mired in economic and political stagnation. These ideas are reinforced — but not necessarily created by — unpopular U.S. foreign policies in the region.

The ongoing violence between Israelis and Palestinians provides opportunities for adversaries of the U.S., but we must remember that Osama bin Laden made his public call for the killing of Americans in 1998, at a time when the Middle East peace process was showing great



OUR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY
EFFORTS IN THE WAR ON
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SLOW AND STEADY
CAMPAIGN.

BY MATT LUSSENHOP

promise. Not surprisingly, bin Laden has attempted to link his cause to that of the Palestinians, as did Saddam Hussein during the 1990-91 Gulf War. There is no doubt that the raw emotions generated by the ongoing violence between Palestinians and Israelis create an environment in which messages of incitement and extremism can more easily gain traction. However, even if a quick and easy solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict were somehow imposed tomorrow, that does not mean that the threat of international terrorism would fade away. Nor does it mean that our public diplomacy problems in the Arab and Muslim world would be resolved.

The campaign in Afghanistan has demonstrated that Osama bin Laden and his al-Qaida operatives can be rooted out, their networks disrupted and their assets frozen. But how do we root out and discredit the deeply-held beliefs that provide moral and intellectual cover for terrorists, their sympathizers and apologists? How do we deprive enemies of the ability to gain ground with their ideas, while providing young and rapidly growing Arab and Muslim populations with alternative visions of the future that are as compelling as bin Laden's vision, but based on tolerance, security, stability and prosperity? Or at the very least, how do we blunt this damaging antipathy toward the U.S.?

The U.S. Response

Immediately after the attacks, the challenge to U.S. public diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim world has been to make clear that:

- The U.S. was a victim of an unjustifiable terrorist act;
- The U.S. is neither anti-Islam nor engaged in a war against Muslims; and
- The U.S. will bring to justice the terrorist networks that planned and carried out the attacks, and will eliminate terrorism in the world.

Our message is clear. But the challenge is to be heard and understood in an atmosphere rife with criticism, resentment and suspicion of the U.S.

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Most Americans are puzzled that such large segments of the world sympathize with terrorists.

One effective way of addressing both mass and elite audiences in the Arab world has been through the Arabic-language satellite TV networks popular among Arab viewers dissatisfied with state-owned television networks that have long been their only viewing option. Secretary of State Colin Powell has been interviewed by Al-Jazeera, Egypt TV, and the Moroccan "2M" TV network, and held a roundtable with representatives from the major Arab print publications. Other senior officials from State (Deputy Secretary Richard Armitage, Under Secretary Marc Grossman, Under Secretary Alan Larson, and many more), USAID and the Defense Department have also appeared in recent months on news and information shows to present the U.S. point of view. In addition, National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice has met with a major Arab media outlet every week since January, and other administration officials have reached out to major international Arabic-language newspapers and international Arabic-language TV networks such as Al-Jazeera, the Middle East Broadcasting Centre, Abu Dhabi Satellite TV, and Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation International. These efforts are ongoing.

Recognizing the need to speak directly to the Arab world in Arabic, retired Ambassador Chris Ross — a former U.S. ambassador to Syria and Algeria and a fluent speaker of Arabic — returned to the State Department as a senior coordinator in October. Amb. Ross has given dozens of interviews to Arab TV and radio networks and newspapers, and continues to engage in direct dialogues in Arabic via digital video-conference with opinion leaders in the Middle East.

One of the most important aspects of U.S. public diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim world is an untold story — the work of our U.S. embassies overseas. U.S. ambassadors and diplomats have appeared on television talk shows, hosted roundtables and seminars on U.S. policy and society, aggressively disseminated information and argued our points face-to-face not only with host government officials, but with academics, journalists, editors, and students — on camera and on-the-record, at college campuses and in private homes.

To list just a few highlights of the creativity of America's diplomats in the field:

- U.S. ambassadors across the Muslim world hosted

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traditional “iftar” (breaking of the fast) dinners during the month of Ramadan (mid-November to mid-December). For example, U.S. Ambassador to Saudi Arabia Robert Jordan’s iftar dinner for prominent Saudis was widely covered in the Saudi media; one Saudi Arabian newspaper bannered the headline “U.S. Ambassador to the Kingdom Calls for Taking the Occasion of Ramadan to Promote Tolerance and Brotherhood.”

- In November, Embassy Cairo instituted a mobile messaging system in recognition of the fact that millions of Egyptians rely on cell phones. Through this service, subscribers can regularly receive U.S. information, texts and statements by contacting the embassy and signing up. The embassy’s efforts have been so intensive and widespread that they have been extensively covered by both Egyptian and international media.

- Embassy Islamabad assisted a team from Pakistan Television and Radio with a visit to the U.S. in late November, during which the team filmed interviews with high-level administration officials and Muslim-Americans,

visited Ground Zero in New York City, and personally witnessed — and reported on — U.S. determination to prevail in the war on terrorism. These reports, including one on Pakistani victims of the Sept. 11 attacks, were aired on both Pakistan TV and radio.

- Embassy Rabat disseminated audiotapes of interviews with Islamic personalities condemning the attacks widely among Morocco’s Islamic authorities. These made such an impression that the leading Arabic-language newspaper *Al-Alam* transcribed the entire tape and published the transcript as a full-page article on Jan. 9.

- A U.S. embassy-sponsored series of lectures on the relationship between Islam and the West in November drew standing-room-only crowds at universities in the cities of Damascus and Homs, with many Syrian students traveling from remote villages to attend the lectures.

Does It Matter?

Both practitioners and observers of public diplomacy would agree we have a difficult, long-term challenge ahead

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of us as the war on terrorism moves on to its next phases. While our military campaign in Afghanistan has proceeded at lightning speed, characterized by quick strikes and special operations, it would be more realistic to think of the public diplomacy campaign in the war on terrorism along the lines of World War I — a slow and steady campaign fought over inches and years.

U.S. pundits and commentators have been quick to weigh in with their criticisms and prescriptions of what Washington must do to win over hearts and minds in the Arab and Muslim world. It is not surprising that most of the opinions have been highly critical of our efforts, and some have questioned the point of public diplomacy at all. Some have argued that our quick military success in Afghanistan is the best public diplomacy we can have. True, but military victories can go only so far, and their impact fades over time. We need to build on our military and political successes, and translate them into long-term public diplomacy gains.

This requires sustained efforts involving academic, pro-

fessional and cultural exchanges that build understanding of core American values. It includes expanding existing programs that have shown true success, such as the Fulbright scholarships and the International Visitor program, and creating new programs that focus on youth, education and dialogue among civilizations. As one Egyptian alumnus of the Fulbright scholarship program explained in an article in the *Washington Post* of Jan. 20, his scholarship to study in the United States accounted for “How I Became a Recruit for America.” More recruits are sorely needed.

While it is vital to get our message out quickly and consistently, public diplomacy does not consist only of delivering information. It involves convincing the peoples of the Arab and Muslim world that our information is accurate and truthful, that we share core values of tolerance and respect, that our policies flow from these shared values, and that these policies are ultimately good for the world. It is a task requiring immense creativity, dedication and above all, patience. ■