

# A CALL TO ARMS: JUMP-STARTING DIPLOMACY

**L**ate last summer, the Bush administration finally started to address the erosion of American credibility throughout the Islamic world, which had plummeted to alarmingly low levels since the al-Aqsa intifada began last year. Despite a growing anger on the Arab street and in regional media over Washington's perceived anti-Muslim bias and unyielding support for Israel, U.S. policies had gone largely undefended.

Even after the Sept. 11 attacks, it took the administration several weeks to gain its footing and begin countering the image it had allowed its enemies to define. Initially, foreign media requests went largely unanswered. This benign neglect of Islamic public opinion only proved a boon for the anti-American rhetoric of Osama bin Laden and his followers, who argued with some success that the U.S. deserved such horror.

But as the Pentagon prepared to battle bin Laden in Afghanistan, the State Department began to arm itself for the battlefield of ideas. Secretary of State Colin Powell sent out the word to all posts that public diplomacy would be a top priority. Toward that end, he dispatched Charlotte Beers, his brand-new under secretary for public diplomacy and public affairs, to do for the U.S. image what she had done for Uncle Ben's Rice, the highly successful ad campaign for which she was best known before assuming her position in October.

Even under the best of circumstances, convincing a highly skeptical Arab and Muslim world that the United States was not at war with

Islam, while the U.S. undertook a massive bombing campaign over Afghanistan, would have been a daunting challenge. Making matters worse, as funding for the Foreign Service steadily declined since the end of the Cold War, public diplomacy programs were hit particularly hard.

Beers first tried to establish a dialogue between the Arab and Western worlds by opening up lines of communication between the State Department and the foreign press. She sought the counsel of Arab and Muslim leaders and Arab-Americans to help craft a message that Washington could communicate effectively in the region. She also recently toured Egypt and Morocco, countries where the Arab media have traditionally been particularly harsh on the U.S., and anti-American protests have been among the largest.

In an interview, Beers said that she has found herself "deeply interested in the many facets of Islam." She noted that "in other circumstances where we were engaged in a conflict, we had enough time and shared history that we

knew enough to develop a point of view. Now we find as a country that we're told that so many people do not like us and we don't even have a frame of reference for why they feel that way and what they're talking about."

Technology proved a crucial platform for deploying the U.S. message, with the State Department Web site becoming the first line of offense in the public diplomacy campaign. Immediately following Sept. 11, State's home page featured a map illustrating the more than 60 countries whose citizens perished in the attacks and photos of worldwide vigils for the victims. Popular Web search engines, such as Yahoo, carried banner ads that allowed Internet users in over 20 countries to click through directly to State's Web site



DESPITE A SLOW  
START AFTER SEPT. 11,  
THE ADMINISTRATION  
IS DOING BETTER.

BY ELISE LABOTT

and read the latest in the war on terror in seven languages. And the foreign press center increased its use of digital video conferencing to institute dialogues with foreign journalists.

The State Department's Rewards for Justice Program also received a makeover. Advertising experts donated their time to design a new series of radio and print ads asking for Americans' support in tracking down terrorists by being aware of potential suspicious activity in their own backyard. Plans are under way to translate the ads into over 30 languages.

In November, Beers introduced a hard-copy brochure, also posted on the Web site, offering a graphic, photo-laden account of the Sept. 11 tragedy. The booklet laid out a case for bin Laden's involvement in the attacks and hailed the U.S. military action in Afghanistan as an attempt to root out terrorism. The brochure was translated into 30 languages and sent to U.S. posts throughout the Islamic world. It also ran as a full insert in *Newsweek's* Arabic edition.

### **Justifying the War**

To reinforce the central theme — the U.S. military campaign against the Taliban and al-Qaida in Afghanistan is not a war against Islam — another campaign sought to educate Islamic countries about Islam in American life. President Bush visited an American mosque and spoke of Islam as a peace-loving religion, and an online photo essay portrayed the life of American Muslims. A series of U.S. documentaries and radio programs co-produced with Muslim-Americans are also under way, as are plans for more speaking engagements and editorial pieces by Muslim-Americans.

Despite the new outreach efforts, the administration struggled to find the right voice and message to explain its goals in Afghanistan. There was widespread concern that while the military battles were going well, the war of ideas was already lost. As Ramadan approached, heads of state

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publicly called on the administration to stop bombing during the holy Muslim holiday.

To counter the 24-hour assault on the U.S. message, Washington and London established information "war rooms" in their capitals and in Islamabad, modeled after

those used to plot strategy for political campaigns. These offices became clearinghouses of information for reporters and may have served as a turning point for the public relations effort. Rapid response teams were ready with anything from numbers on casualties to statistics on humanitarian aid delivered to Afghanistan. Because there was no coalition spokesman in Pakistan, where the Taliban ambassador briefed the press daily, former Ambassador to Qatar Kenton Keith was brought out of retirement and dispatched to Islamabad.

The coalition also coordinated interviews and designed proactive diplomatic messages for each day. Condemnation of the brutal treatment of women under the Taliban typified the strategy. First Lady Laura Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair's wife Cherie both gave speeches on the topic, and every U.S. cabinet member speaking in public the same day addressed the issue.

The war room staffers also orchestrated a campaign to illustrate American respect for Ramadan. In addition to the annual State Department iftar (breaking of the Ramadan daily fast) dinner, President Bush hosted 50 ambassadors from Muslim countries at a White House dinner and every U.S. ambassador abroad hosted Muslims in their host countries. The worldwide remembrance ceremonies on Dec. 11, three months after the attacks, were another war room idea designed to remind people of the brutality of the attacks and why the military campaign against Afghanistan was under way.

Still, the TV images of Afghan victims of the coalition military campaign have proven a powerful counterpoint to the administration's public relations initiatives. Arabs and Muslims saw their Afghan brothers fall prey to the U.S. bombs on satellite television networks, such as Qatar's Al-Jazeera, just as they saw Washington's ally, Israel, roll tanks into Palestinian villages. To counter such images, at first the administration used traditional means of diplomacy. When the Emir of Qatar came to Washington, for example, Secretary Powell publicly asked him to tone down programming he considered hostile to America.

### Reaching Out to Regional Media

When that approach failed to stem the anti-American tide among Arabs and Muslims, administration officials say they felt an urgent need to take to the airwaves as well. By early October, Powell and other top U.S. figures flooded Arab television and newspapers throughout the region.

For example, Hafez al-Mirazi, Al-Jazeera's Washington bureau chief, contends that the network's requests for interviews were ignored in the weeks following Sept. 11, forcing it to air press briefings by the White House, State Department and Pentagon in order to portray the U.S. viewpoint. But once the administration realized that Al-Jazeera offered an instant platform to reach 35 million Arabs, al-Mirazi notes, "the skies opened." For a short while the network became a favorite outlet for the Bush administration, and nearly every cabinet member was offered up for interviews. Beers even suggested she would consider advertising on the network.

Unfortunately, the interviews didn't have the desired effect. National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice's reference to Syria's support for Hezbollah as akin to supporting terrorism only fueled anger amongst an Arab public who views the guerillas as freedom fighters against Israeli oppression. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and even President Bush himself, also antagonized viewers. Furthermore, the president's further comments during a speech in the days following Sept. 11, calling for a "crusade" against terrorism, evoked a painful history of Christian attacks on Islamic nations. Only Secretary Powell, who has acknowledged the desperation and helplessness felt by many in the region, is viewed as a power-broker who understands the grievances Arabs and Muslims carry against the U.S.

Meanwhile, Beers hired Christopher Ross, former ambassador to Syria, as her deputy. The belief was that Ross, a fluent Arabic speaker and veteran Mid-East traveler, would not only translate American policy into the primary language used by Muslims, but explain the Islamic mindset to an administration desperately trying to play catch-up. Each time a bin Laden tape aired on Al-Jazeera, Ross was on hand to defuse the power of his words and rebut his allegations point by point.

But despite his language skills, Ross lacks credibility with many Arab viewers. Many Arab diplomats and journalists say that someone who understands U.S. policy but is able to speak more freely, such as a former State Department official, would be more effective. Nor did it

help that that some observers felt the administration was more interested in advertising its public diplomacy efforts than actually conducting them successfully.

"It was as if they were carpet-bombing the Arab world in an attempt to make us love them," says Moufac Harb, former Washington bureau chief for the Arabic newspaper *al-Hayat*. "They are using gimmicks used in U.S. political campaigns for the entire Arab world. It can't be a one-size-fits-all approach." And recent reports that the Pentagon's Office of Strategic Influence might leak false information to foreign media outlets (though they were subsequently disavowed) reinforced perceptions that Washington wanted to "brainwash" the Islamic world, rather than understand it.

It is also unclear whether even the most skillful public diplomacy campaign can resonate with the youth burning effigies of President Bush and wearing T-shirts of bin Laden. Nearly one-half of the world's population is under 25, many of whom aren't able to reach the State Department Web site on a personal computer. The most crucial audience the United States must reach are young men studying in religious schools (madrassas), where hating America is Lesson Number 1.

Toward that end, Congress has coughed up \$30 million to develop a radio network for broadcast throughout the Arab world geared to reaching listeners under 25. The new 24-hour network will take a modern approach to delivering the U.S. point of view, featuring music, news and talk shows to be broadcast in 22 countries with localized programming blocks. Norm Pattuz of the Broadcasting Board of Governors said the network will introduce American democratic values by allowing listeners to call in and participate in talk shows, make song requests and vote in daily polls — options which are not readily available in many countries with state-run media. Another initiative, advocated by Senator Joe Biden, could expand the new U.S. broadcasting goals to all countries with significant Muslim populations. Dubbed the "9/11 Initiative," it calls for the expansion of the current radio network and the establishment of a television station.

Officials acknowledge mass media alone are unlikely to forge understanding between populations whose current realities are worlds apart, however. Patricia Harrison, assistant secretary of state for the State Department's Bureau of Cultural Affairs, said her department is increasing cultural exchanges, with a focus on bringing more Arab youth and journalists to the United States.

Similarly, while U.S. ambassadors have increased public outreach in their host countries, a discussion with Arab and Muslim publics cannot be the sole privilege of elite journalists and professionals. The U.S. must reach out to more clerics, students and public servants from all walks of life, to help build a civil society where public opinion is respected and tolerated.

Toward that end, the administration is formulating a campaign to promote democracy throughout the Middle East and convince school systems to stop the kind of fundamentalist, extremist teachings that foster terrorist mindsets. However, selling democracy may be no easier than selling the war on terrorism.

### **Sustaining the Initiative**

That is why public diplomacy must not be a one-shot deal, but rather a permanent core objective of U.S. foreign policy. Anti-American sentiment throughout Europe and Asia over Washington's perceived arrogance and unilateralism is as disturbing as the current anger in the Muslim world. Barry Fulton, who served as an associate director of USIA for 30 years, contends that "Public diplomacy should be thinking right now not only about the Islamic world but the rest of the world."

Such a goal, he points out, will take more money than is currently allotted for public outreach. The State Department FY 2003 budget requests \$287 million for public diplomacy activities related to the war on terrorism, including \$60 million for broadcasting, and another \$247 million for educational and cultural exchange programs. But an increase in broad-based cultural exchanges and public awareness campaigns can only be sustained if the administration and Congress recognize the importance of public diplomacy as a down payment in national security and make the new programs a permanent fixture of the U.S. budget. Recently, administration officials said they are considering making the information war room permanent — a good sign public diplomacy has truly joined the diplomatic arsenal.

Still, as Ned Walker, a former assistant secretary of State for Near East affairs and president of the Middle East Institute, notes, no matter how good a public relations campaign is, the policy must resonate within the region. "We have to overcome the premise of stereotypes that say we are arrogant, that we aren't listening, that we are led by Israel," Walker says. "The problem is what your policies do, and do they relate

to the region in a way they want to see and hear."

Similarly, President Bush's "axis of evil" reference to Iran, Iraq and North Korea in his State of the Union speech has already drawn criticism from the Arab world and, if taken at face value, could reinforce the perception that the U.S. doesn't want to settle its differences peacefully, but rather through a war with Islam.

Washington has its work cut out for it. A recent Gallup poll of residents in nine Muslim countries found that by a two-to-one margin, these nations have an unfavorable opinion of the U.S. Not only did respondents say they had a negative view of American values, but they believe the U.S. does not respect Islamic values and is unfair in its perception of Muslim countries. Even months after bin Laden and his al-Qaida network were fingered as the masterminds of the Sept. 11 attack, 61 percent of those surveyed still do not believe the attacks were committed by Arabs.

Ironically, some of the countries where anti-American sentiment looms largest are among the greatest recipients of U.S. assistance. In Kuwait, which the U.S. liberated from Iraq during the Gulf War, 36 percent of those surveyed believe the attacks were justified, the highest percentage of any country polled. The opinion of America is similarly low in Egypt, which receives a lion's share of U.S. aid. It seems Washington must work harder to illustrate America's generosity to these countries and, when necessary, use tough traditional diplomacy with their leaders to help leverage public opinion.

Many Arab diplomats and journalists suggest America has lost the ear of the Arab world due to a failure to balance its own interests with those causes of most concern to ordinary Arabs — the suffering of the Iraqi people as a result of the U.N. sanctions and perceived bias of the U.S. toward Israel at the expense of the Palestinian people. Although the latter issue does not affect most Muslims as dramatically as it does the Palestinians, it has come to symbolize the more general belief that America doesn't care about Arabs and Muslims as people, or take their concerns seriously. And as such, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will continue to be the decisive factor affecting Arab and Muslim countries' relations with the U.S.

Thus, perhaps the greatest lesson America might take from its first post-Cold War public diplomacy campaign is the importance of hearing out the people with whom it seeks to communicate — no matter how painful the feedback it receives. ■