

American Public Diplomacy and the Islamic and Arab World: A Communication Update & Assessment

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Key Points

- The terrorist attacks in September 11, 2001, focused attention on America's public diplomacy.
- The U.S. Congress, State Department and White House have all intensified their efforts to get America's message out and improve America's image.
- Instead of yielding a more positive American image, America's public diplomacy appears to have generated more anti-American sentiment.

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in America on 9/11, Americans were asking, "Why do they hate us?" The attacks underscored the importance of public diplomacy. As Congressman Henry Hyde noted at last year's congressional hearings, "the perceptions of foreign publics have domestic consequences." President George Bush echoed the sense of urgency when he said: "we have to do a better job of telling our story."

In short order there was a flurry of activity to get America's true message out to the world. Within a month after the attacks, a former advertising executive with more than forty years of experience, Charlotte Beers became Under Secretary of State for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy. The Senate and House held hearings, passing 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 with America's public diplomacy initiative.

The Arab and Muslim world became a central focus of many of the State Department's new initiatives because this was where the American message was being perceived as horribly distorted or missing altogether. Top American officials began granting interviews to the Al-Jazeera news network, taking America's case directly to the Arab public. The State Department's compiled a booklet on the link between Al-Qaeda and September 11, "The Network of Terrorism," that quickly became its most widely disseminated brochure ever. The State Department also produced a website and series of mini-documentaries on the positive contributions of Muslim Americans. The United States also launched its own Arabic-language radio station Radio Sawa, featuring American and Arab pop music with short news broadcasts. Radio Sawa has successfully garnered such a large listening audience that there are plans to launch an Arabic-language television station styled on the CNN news format.

With such a concerted effort at the highest levels of the American government to get America's message out, to "win the hearts and minds" of the Arabs and Muslims, one would expect an increase in understanding and support of American policy. Instead, it appears the opposite has occurred. America's intensified public diplomacy initiative has met with more misunderstandings, and support for American policies has declined globally—not just in the Arab and Muslim world.

Studies conducted by the Pew Research Center, the German Marshall Fund and the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, and the University of Michigan all cite a precipitous drop in support for the United States around the globe, even among traditional American allies as well as new adversaries. The *Economist* (January 2, 2003) noted similar findings last month in a report on American values. However, in the regions where the most intensive public diplomacy efforts have been made, the negative image of America is particularly pronounced. In Pakistan, a critical ally in the United States military operation against the Taliban in Afghanistan, support has dropped 22 percent. Some believe that the surprising victory of the Islamic party in Pakistan earlier this year stemmed from increased anti-American sentiments. In Egypt, a longtime American ally, only six percent of those polled have a favorable view of American policy.

The immediate explanation for the declining support is the Bush administration's war on terrorism and the impending military operation in Iraq. However, the whole purpose of public diplomacy is to generate support from foreign publics for political policies. To be effective, public diplomacy must work not only in times of peace, but also in times of conflict. In fact, when conflicts are pending, it is essential that public diplomacy be effective if hostilities are to be avoided and potentially destabilizing public sentiment contained.

The critical question is: How have America's efforts to improve its public diplomacy caused a decrease in foreign public support, particularly in the Arab and Muslim world? If the United States does a launch military operation against Iraq, a move sure to fuel anti-American sentiments, will American public diplomacy be able to meet the challenge?

II. When Campaigns Fail or Backfire

- American public diplomacy may not be achieving positive results for logistical and strategic reasons.
- American public diplomacy appears to backfiring because the cultural style, content, and tactics used resonate positively with the American public, but negatively with non-American publics.
- American public diplomacy appears to be backfiring because the targeted foreign publics are getting conflicting messages from the United States.

Logistically, time is a major factor determining the effectiveness of a campaign. The campaign goals outlined by American public diplomacy officials require formulating, testing, and disseminating information to change attitudes and ultimately behaviors. Such campaigns normally require five to seven years to be effective. Thus, it is too early to refer to the current attitudes and behaviors in the targeted areas as “results.” Officials can do little to speed up the process of changing attitudes that have developed over a substantial span of years.

Strategically, another factor that affects a campaign’s effectiveness is the degree of cooperation between senior policy makers and those responsible for communicating those policies. The greater the coordination, the more effective the overall campaign. Domestically, few successful political campaigns are run today without the active involvement of a communication strategist and pollster to ensure that policy statements are well received by the public. These professionals are at the decision-making table. The close link between policy formulation and image cultivation is well established on the domestic front. On the international front, such coordination, which is even more critical because the stakes are so much higher and the cultural terrain less familiar, appears to be lacking.

While time requirements and strategic coordination may account for the perceived lack of results, American public diplomacy appears also to be generating negative results. In short, it’s backfiring.

Cultural differences in style and substance often cause campaigns to backfire, particularly in an international, cross-cultural setting. Public diplomacy appears to entail more than simply translating official messages into a new language and disseminating them to a targeted population. It is equally important that the underlying cultural style and content of a nation’s public diplomacy messages resonate positively with the foreign public. If there is asymmetry in cultural styles, a nation’s effort to improve its public diplomacy may inadvertently magnify cultural differences and amplify misunderstandings. One can alienate the very same audiences one is trying to persuade. That’s a public diplomacy backfire.

Many of the new American public diplomacy initiatives reflect a uniquely American cultural style. For example, President Bush’s penchant for “speaking straight” may resonate positively with an American public that values directness. But the Arab public prefers more indirect messages, especially in public. Thus, irrespective of the message’s content, differences in delivery style can cause a message to resonate negatively.

Similarly, Americans view facts and arguments as particularly persuasive. Much of America’s public diplomacy efforts have focused on gathering as many facts as possible as a bulwark to a persuasive argument. In other cultures, metaphors and analogies that suggest important relationships are much more persuasive than impersonal “facts.” Arguments in these cultures are seen as relationship busters, not builders. American officials may be perplexed by how callously foreign audiences dismiss the facts, yet foreign publics are chagrined by how American officials are so myopic in their focus.

American officials are also perplexed by the rampant spread and credibility of rumors. The rumors usually are not true, but not only are the rumors believed, they also appear to spread

faster and farther than anything disseminated over the mass media. Rumors speak to the power that interpersonal communication has over the most extensive media network American officials can devise. Television may be good in getting the message out, but personal discussions usually determine what the message is.

The perception of conflicting messages can also cause a campaign to backfire. In this regard, American officials are working on two fronts, one external and one internal. Externally, America is working to combat competing messages from the Arab media and Islamic religious leaders. To combat competing messages from the Arab media such as Al-Jazeera, the Arab news network, the United States is considering launching its own Arabic-language television station. To combat competing messages from Islamic sources, part of the State Department's efforts are focusing on ways to reform school curriculum. Both these initiatives appear valid. However, both initiatives reinforce a competitive stance vis a vis the United States and the Arab and Islamic world, rather than a cooperative, relationship-building stance.

Another source of conflicting messages to the Arab and Muslim world appears to be coming from the United States itself. Addressing these internal sources of conflicting messages can help to deflate the power of conflict messages from external sources. The United States may need to become more vigilant in addressing the dual messages it is sending to the Arab and Muslim world because each perceived contradiction erodes America's overall credibility.

For example, American officials say the war on terrorism is not against Islam, yet, many in the Arab and Muslim world perceive that predominantly Muslim countries are being targeted. They cite the different stance the United States is taking in advocating the use of force in Iraq, a Muslim country, and diplomacy in North Korea, a non-Muslim country.

Similarly, American officials question Islam's tolerance and decry anti-American statements from Muslim religious leaders. Yet, many throughout the Muslim world question America's own tolerance when prominent American religious leaders deride Islam. The President has disavowed and condemned these statements and some of the religious leaders have apologized, but the damage had been done. America's own religious intolerance became the story.

The current American public diplomacy initiative also vigorously promotes a positive image of Muslim Americans through special websites and advertisements. Yet, many Muslims in America now live in fear of ethnic or religious profiling. Some are afraid to fly on airplanes, some are afraid to give to charities, and others are afraid to wear a headscarf. Hate crimes and ethnic profiling of Muslims has grown at an alarming rate in the United States. Their fears are expressed to friends and relatives abroad.

American officials extol the virtues of American democracy and justice. Yet, many in the Arab and Muslim world who have family in the United States are petrified by the perception of a new system of justice in post-September 11 America. The idea that someone can be picked up, held in secret, for an indefinite period of time, and without access to a lawyer is truly frightening if one sees religion or ethnicity as the only common denominator.

Finally, American officials speak ardently of their support for Israel in the conflict with the Palestinians. Given the long-standing alliance between Israel and the United States, as well as the close family ties between many in both countries, the identification that many Americans have with Israel is understandable. For many of the same reasons that Americans identify with Israel, many in the Arab and Muslim world identify with the Palestinians. Just as Americans appear to respond immediately and emotionally to the deaths of Israelis – and appear insensitive to the deaths of Palestinians – many throughout the Arab and Muslim world respond immediately and emotionally to the deaths of Palestinians – and appear insensitive to the deaths of Israelis. The use of American-made weapons by Israel visually associates the American image with the death and destruction among the Palestinian people, a predominantly Arab and Muslim people with whom others throughout the Arab and Muslim world closely identify.

There is an important footnote to be made about American policy. American policy in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is not an abstract entity that is contained solely within the realm of American values. American policy concretely translates into the use of high-powered American-made weapons being used in heavily populated civilian areas. The inevitable result is the large number of civilian casualties and the vivid images of human suffering. These images speak louder than the volumes of words about American values. One Jordanian teenage girl spoke of her perception of American values, suggesting that while American values are noble, there is a double standard in their application: “All the Americans ever talk about is their freedom, and their liberty and their independence, and they can’t see that they are actually taking that away from people [the Palestinians] who have lived in that land for generations and generations.” Thus to focus on promoting American values, without addressing the underlying contradictions and perceptions, may be counter productive.

III. Reconsidering American Public Diplomacy

- Relationship-building strategies may be more effective than message and image-building strategies.
- Until American officials address the reasons why American public diplomacy is backfiring, intensifying its campaign may only fuel anti-American sentiment.
- If the United States takes action in Iraq, the American military will become the face of American public diplomacy and precipitate special considerations.

One can look at public diplomacy from two perspectives: relationship-building strategies versus messages and image-building strategies. Currently, American public diplomacy appears very much focused on its message and its image. Relationship-building strategies focus on developing mutually beneficial and reciprocal connections between people and nations. Adopting relationship-building strategies represents a new mindset and approach. However relationship building is not alien to American ideals and values (it reflects the best of America’s

civic spirit), and most important, it may prove to be a much more effective for American public diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim world than the current approach.

Currently, the United States does not appear to be adopting a relationship-building approach. When American officials began to address public diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim world much was made of how to “win the hearts and minds” of people. The very focus on “winning” in itself suggests a competition, a dividing line between “us” and “them.” One wins, the other loses. The negative perception of an “us-versus-them” mindset can undermine the win/win, cooperative perspective that is needed to build positive, mutually beneficial relations.

Relationship building means paying close attention to language. In times of conflict, securing the support of one’s own public is the most important task. One way American leaders have been demonstrating their support and rallying the American public is through the use of strong rhetoric. However, their words are heard not only at home, but around the world. Using strong rhetoric to gain American public support may be counter-productive if it results in loss of support abroad. America may be an individualist culture and shrug off personal insults. In collectivist cultures, to insult one is to insult the entire group. Culturally insensitive remarks are easy to make, hard to retract, and backfire horribly. American public diplomacy officials may need to work more closely with American politicians to assist them in becoming more culturally aware of how others may perceive American political rhetoric.

Ultimately, relationship-building strategies may also be more effective because they are more culturally attuned to that of the publics with whom America is trying to communicate. The focus on getting its message out is a one-way communication approach that requires very little participation from the audience beyond the Arab and Muslim publics accepting the American message. Nothing in the Arab or Islamic world suggests that this public subscribes to a one-way, transmission model of communication. The culture and society are built around relationships. Relationships-building strategies tend to be more long-term, but they are more in tune with the culture of the people in the Arab and Muslim world.

Second, American officials may need to address the reasons why public diplomacy is generating more anti-American sentiment before it takes further steps to intensify public diplomacy efforts. In this regard, American public diplomacy may opt for less visible and aggressive communication strategies. Currently, American public diplomacy officials appear to be focused on the technical problem of disseminating information without accounting for how that information is being interpreted by foreign publics. In the course of disseminating information, it appears that problems of conflicting messages, different communication styles, and cultural insensitivity are causing American efforts to backfire. The United States is trying to hammer home its message to the Arab and Muslim world; “they” aren't getting it, but America’s image is taking a beating. Until the counter-productive factors are addressed, disseminating more of the same information in the same manner is likely to compound America’s image problem, not lessen it.

Strategically, whenever an image is highly negative, the goal is to deflect the audience’s attention away and downplay the negatives. Communication professionals skilled in crisis communication management, more commonly found in the corporate or private sector, have

often been quite effective in deflecting public criticism and minimizing the negative effect of unpopular actions.

Given the possibility of the United States launching a pre-emptive strike into a large Arab country that is predominantly Muslim, crisis public diplomacy may be the most strategic communication option and most prudent course of action at this time.

Finally, the possibility of American military action and a continued military presence in Iraq raises special concerns for American public diplomacy. The American military will likely become the face of American public diplomacy, overshadowing all forms of verbal or mass media efforts. The direct interaction between American military personnel and the local population will be the message as well as the medium.

The American military enters with a distinct disadvantage. Already the media has spoken extensively about an American “military occupation” and setting up “a civil administration.” The American association with military occupation is fundamentally positive; the American occupation of Germany and Japan helped transform both into world economic powers. In the Arab and Muslim world, military occupation conjures up images of Israeli military occupation; images that are in no way benign or positive. These negative images are fertile ground for rumors, stereotypes and fears that will shape the public perception of an American military occupation of Iraq. Similarly, the use of the term civil administration is associated with Israeli attempts to take control of the Palestinian people. Again, the association is quite negative and ripe for being perceived as negative no matter how positive American intentions may be.

Lastly, cultural awareness and sensitivity will be key for helping the American military to put its best face forward, avoid tensions and ensure the safety of both American military personnel and the people they encounter. If American troops have not been trained in important cultural differences in behavior, such as eye contact, they need training so that they do not misinterpret a harmless stare as an aggressive challenge. If there are not sufficient female soldiers to interact with the local female population, there will likely be no interaction and thus an opportunity for relationship building may be lost. If religious practices such as covering one’s hair is looked down upon or reverence to holy sites or religious rituals are not upheld, American military will lose important opportunities for demonstrating tolerance and respect for the religious beliefs of the local people. All of these seemingly small, concrete gestures by the American military will do much to shape the face of American public diplomacy during this critical time.