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A Practical Guide to Tapping America's Underappreciated, Underutilized Anti-Islamist Allies across the Muslim World

Robert Satloff

With more than 1.3 billion Muslims worldwide, it is not realistic for the United States government—working both independently and in concert with other governments, international organizations, and private initiatives—to thoroughly "drain the swamp" in which Islamist[1] terrorist organizations find their recruits. Even if one were to accept a low-end estimate of the number of Islamists worldwide (say, 5 percent of all Muslims) and a low-end estimate of the number of terrorists or their activist sympathizers—financiers, logistical supporters, ideological advocates—among them (say, 1 percent of all Islamists), then there are at least 600,000 hard-core

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1. Islamist is defined here as a Muslim who seeks—either through peaceful or violent means—the imposition of Qur'anic law (Sharia) and a Qur'anic-based state, rejecting the legitimacy of the existing political structure in his/her country or region. Although organically antidemocratic (i.e., opposed to "rule of the people"), Islamists can equally reject democratic systems and monarchical ones, the principal point of departure for them being the imperative to impose "divine law" in place of human-made systems of governance.

radicals fishing for followers in a sea of at least 60,000,000 potential recruits.[2] To identify, target, isolate, co-opt, and, in some cases, neutralize the former is a gargantuan task. To do the same to the latter is patently impossible.

If fully "draining the swamp" is not achievable, however, there remains much that can be done to decrease the number of Muslims who become Islamists and to decrease the number of Islamists who become terrorists or their activist sympathizers. Each of these challenges requires different tools and different strategies. In essence, whereas decreasing the number of Islamists who become terrorists is principally the province of intelligence and security agencies, decreasing the number of Muslims who become Islamists is a much wider concern that touches on numerous aspects of U.S. foreign policy.

Curtailing the appeal of Islamism should be a matter of prime importance to practitioners of what is popularly known as "public diplomacy." To many, public diplomacy is merely a less grating term for "public relations abroad," or the less-than-fine-art of packaging and selling America to foreign audiences. Although that is an element of the larger picture, public diplomacy is—or *ought* to be—much more than that.

Just as traditional diplomacy revolves around strengthening allies, weakening adversaries, and advancing America's interests and values, the same can be said of public diplomacy. Although the targets are different (peoples, not government) and the operational time frame is often longer, the objectives are similar: empowering friends, undermining the influence of adversaries, and nurturing popular understanding of (and, one hopes, support for) U.S. national interests and values.

2. Daniel Pipes, for example, suggests that "perhaps 10 to 15 percent" of all Muslims subscribe to "militant Islam." See Pipes, *Militant Islam Reaches America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), 3.

Unfortunately, too few professional public diplomats view their mission in terms of allies and adversaries. Indeed, the fundamental problem of U.S. public diplomacy in the post–September 11 era is that it has rarely evinced a clear sense of mission, has rarely differentiated clearly between friend and foe, and has rarely focused its energies on extending a helping hand to those elements in society—especially in Muslim-majority countries—that are America's natural allies in the struggle against radical Islamism.

Defining a detailed, full-scale, soup-to-nuts program to achieve those objectives is beyond the scope of this brief essay. However, what follows are three broad suggestions that, if implemented, would begin to put U.S. public diplomacy squarely on the right side of the fight against Islamism.

Identifying and Supporting Allies

As noted above, the overwhelming majority of the world's Muslims are not Islamists. However, Islamists are often highly motivated and well funded. Although they are not choreographed by some all-knowing Islamist wizard, they coordinate well among themselves and (especially the nonviolent ones) have a sophisticated, long-range plan to advance their goals. They are people of action. In contrast, non-Islamist Muslims are defined more by who they are *not* rather than by who they *are*. They range across political and religious spectra, from radical atheists to secular, lapsed Muslims to pious, traditional, orthodox believers. They have no common program, no organizational cohesion, no way even to know who in society shares their views.

An important, and rarely pursued, step toward minimizing recruits to Islamism is to identify the potential allies among these non-Islamist Muslims, build networks of common pur-

pose among them, and show that the United States supports them in the currency that matters in local society—that is, visibility and money.

This task requires a different sort of outreach effort than is the norm for U.S. embassies in the Muslim world. Rather than seek out "moderate Islamists" for dialogue designed to promote understanding of U.S. policies and to narrow differences over contested issues, this alternative approach would have U.S. embassies pointedly avoid contact with Islamists (except for intelligence gathering). Instead, it highlights contacts with liberal, even secular, anti-Islamist individuals and organizations. Invitations to embassy functions, participation in ambassadorial press conferences, and opportunities for exchange visits and study tours to the United States are all ways for U.S. officials to shower favor upon groups and individuals. These actions should be viewed as arrows in the larger public diplomacy quiver, for even in this era of pessimistic Pew Research Center polls of America's standing abroad, the imprimatur of the United States is sorely coveted. So are the dollars that U.S. governmental agencies and quasi-official non-governmental organizations (like the National Endowment for Democracy's recipient agencies) dole out to local groups.

In all these programs, the guiding principle should be that the United States supports its current friends and would welcome new ones. Local political communities around the Muslim world are sophisticated: when they see that anti-Islamists of varying stripes (whether female entrepreneurs, crusading investigative journalists, or kids who win English-language spelling bees) are featured at embassy events, receive embassy grants, and win trips to the United States—with nary an Islamist among them—the message will be clear. Conversely, a clear and damaging message is transmitted when Islamists,

even of the mild variety, are the honored guests, lucky beneficiaries, and welcome visitors on those events, grants, and trips.

In addition to highlighting contact with cultural and political allies, U.S. embassies abroad and U.S. public diplomacy in general should focus efforts on networking among groups and individuals that, at least on the Islamist issue, share a common approach. Like building a popular front against Nazism in World War II or against Communism in the Cold War, this may involve bringing together people of very different worldviews to work together for the larger cause of fighting the spread of Islamism. Ironically, U.S. officials who either shun "secularists" for fear of offending Muslim sensibilities, or who have little expertise in distinguishing between traditionalist Muslims and Islamists, are more likely to be reluctant to adopt this approach than are local anti-Islamist Muslims themselves. Because the latter are on the "front line," facing the rising tide of Islamism in schools, mosques, youth groups, grassroots organizations, and civic groups, they are more likely to take risks. The United States should not leave such allies and potential allies out in the cold.

Building such networks is not only important for creating a force-multiplier of reformist activism to counter the Islamists, it is also useful for identifying individuals who could play lead roles in specific public policy issues. Curriculum reform, for example, is a critical battleground of the culture wars in many Muslim societies. The traditional U.S. approach is to offer technical assistance to ministries of education (in the form of consultants, study trips to the United States, the professional advice of English-language officers at embassies, and so forth). However, these efforts periodically fuel criticism and resentment toward U.S. interference in one of the most sensitive areas of local concern.

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A more effective and longer-lasting change—and one with fewer fingerprints of U.S. intervention—would result from behind-the-scenes U.S. endorsement of key reform-minded people from within the bureaucracy and civil society to positions of authority on the local and national review boards often formed to review curricula. Trying to influence the composition of various government bodies both removes the United States from direct interference in the actual process of curriculum reform and ensures that right-thinking people will be in important positions when the current battle is over and the next one is ready to be joined. This can only be achieved if U.S. embassies have already done the vital work of identifying local allies and building a communications infrastructure for networking among them.

Empowering Allies

Although lending visible political support to anti-Islamists is essential, it is not sufficient. The U.S. government should also find innovative ways to strengthen its local anti-Islamist allies. One critical, yet low-cost, arena in which the United States can empower anti-Islamists is in the information field.

One of the lesser-known phenomena in Arab and Muslim society in recent years is the flowering of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). From remote mountainous regions in the High Atlas to the urban slums of Cairo, these organizations have sprouted up to fulfill all sorts of communal and social needs. Sometimes they emerge from the commitment of local community organizers. Sometimes they are creatures of the government, which may construct ad hoc local groups to perform special functions or fulfill services that the government chooses to channel outside the formal system. Sometimes

they are local branches of organizations that have large, international followings.

Whatever their origins, tens of thousands of these organizations now exist throughout the Middle East, and a large number of them are Islamist in orientation. Many of these are registered with local governments in accordance with law, but many others operate in a legal vacuum. In a region where the central government's delivery of basic social services is notoriously bad, NGOs have emerged in many places to supply what governments either cannot or do not provide. Of course, Islamist organizations only compensate for a small fraction of what governments are not able or willing to do, but the model they offer still provides a pathway for the spread of Islamist thought and, possibly, terrorist sympathies to millions of Muslims.

Throughout Arab and Muslim countries, for example, Islamist NGOs—many financed from Saudi Arabia, some with al Qaeda links—have established powerful networks of Islamist-oriented social welfare initiatives. Following a long-term strategy of nurturing the next generation of Islamists, some of the most insidious Islamist NGOs focus exclusively on children. (Hence, for example, they might opt to fund primary schools, youth camps, and after-school programming but not current needs of the adult population, such as adult literacy programs, vocational training classes, or battered women's shelters.) Often, these NGOs operate without formal government license because their services often fill a local need. Local administrators often either look the other way or welcome these organizations, regardless of what officialdom in faraway capitals might prefer (or say they prefer).

Among anti-Islamists, even without knowing about the shadier international links of many of these groups, there is a rising sense of alarm at the spread of such Islamist social wel-

fare activities. Many civic activists, including journalists, would take up the cudgel against the presence of these foreign-funded Islamist organizations and would be especially moved to act if they knew about the possible terrorist connections of some of these outfits. What these activists lack, however, is information, such as documentary evidence describing the political activities and funding sources of these groups and, when it exists, evidence of connection to terrorist acts and organizations. Such information is, to a large extent, part of the U.S. public record, from court transcripts, FBI documents, and congressional reports and testimonies. Indeed, the Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Asset Control publishes a list of "specially designated nationals and blocked persons" that, in the version of September 23, 2003, is 116 pages long. Many of the institutions cited on this list are the same Islamist NGOs that are active in many corners of the Muslim world.[3]

A simple, low-cost but high-value solution would be the creation of a user-friendly, Internet-based clearinghouse of information in Arabic and other local languages, outlining the operations, management, administration, financing, and personnel of all Islamist-oriented initiatives and NGOs and the linkages among them. Such an effort, if brought to the attention of the growing number of anti-Islamist activists and organizations through an aggressive, imaginative outreach campaign, would be a forceful stimulant to action. Information is power, and this sort of information would help empower anti-Islamist Muslims who are concerned about the direction of their own countries and communities to take matters into their own hands.

3. For the OFAC list, periodically updated, see http://www.treas.org/office/eotffc/ofac/sdn/t11sdn.pdf.

Nurturing Future Allies

In the campaign to limit the spread of Islamism, identifying, supporting, and empowering current allies is necessary but still not sufficient. To stand any chance of undercutting the Islamists' popular appeal, the United States must invest much more substantially in developing new and future allies. Here, a central battleground is children's education. Indeed, this is one area in which anti-Islamists should take their cue from Islamists, who, as noted above, have made the battle for the "hearts and minds" of young people a top priority. So far, the United States is not even putting up a fight.

In approaching this problem, it is important to remember another lesson learned from the Islamists: the power of example. In the context of populous countries like Egypt, Morocco, Algeria, and Yemen, Islamist social welfare programming is a proverbial drop in the bucket compared with what actual needs are, and even compared with what existing governments currently do. In a medium-sized town, for example, Islamists may successfully operate a model school, a professionally staffed hospital, or a well-functioning day-care center, but they cannot replace the government's massive, though admittedly broken-down, educational or health care systems. Like terrorists who have learned the ways of asymmetric warfare against conventional armies, Islamists have mastered the tools of reaping considerable public sympathy from providing *examples* of a better-run alternative system without having the responsibility or burden of actually providing such an alternative system.

Curtailing the popular appeal of Islamism should be pursued with a similar strategy. Although the U.S. government can provide some assistance to help fix local school systems, the problems are too huge—and the Islamist challenge is too

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urgent—to rely on that approach. Instead, Washington needs to develop alternative opportunities for anti-Islamist excellence and highly visible models of it.

Promoting English-language education should be a central focus of this effort. Knowing English does not necessarily translate into liberal thought or pro-Americanism, as the legacy of Islamist radicals from Sayyid Qutb to the September 11 bombers underscores. But English is both a portal to Anglo-American culture as well as the access route to the Internet-based information revolution. Knowing English at least gives a resident in a Muslim-majority country the opportunity to learn about America and make judgments about its policies and values without the filter of translation or reliance on biased sources of information. Indeed, studies show that access to information is not itself the key criterion in shaping views on U.S. policy; rather, it is access to different sorts and sources of information—for example, CNN versus al-Jazeera—that could be the key to determining attitudes toward the United States.[4]

Specific initiatives that could be pursued in this strategy include the following:

- Create "English-for-all" after-school programs, at no or nominal cost to parents, in cities and towns throughout the Muslim world. This should be pursued cooperatively with existing NGOs as well as with the governments of other English-speaking countries and the English Speaking Union, the British-based organization that seeks to promote the use of the English language around the globe.

4. See Matthew A. Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro, "Education, Media and Anti-Americanism in the Muslim World," a study by two Harvard University students based on data from the 2002 Gallup poll of the Islamic World, http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~jmshapir/summary100303.pdf.

Similarly, U.S. funds should subsidize the high fees that older students are currently asked to pay for English-language training at specialized programs like AMIDEAST, thereby making those classes more accessible to a wider segment of the population. Few steps could earn the United States more goodwill in Muslim countries than to invest enough money to make English-language study free or extremely low-cost.

- Expand the existing paltry financial support for American-style educational opportunities for students of all ages throughout the Muslim world. Of the 185 U.S. government–recognized "American schools" around the world, fully one-quarter are in Muslim-majority countries and one-tenth are in Arab countries.[5] These schools—ready-made incubators of pro-Americanism—receive paltry levels of assistance from the U.S. government, only $8 million out of a combined annual operating budget of $450 million. Some schools receive as little as 1 percent of their annual operating budget from government funds. Many of these schools attract high concentrations—one-third to one-half—of local students but their often five-digit tuition fees mean that only wealthy, elite local children can attend, sometimes without regard to academic excellence. (Tuition fees for most other students are paid for by governments and international corporations.) Washington should target schools in Arab and Muslim countries for expanded merit-based, academic scholarship funds. These would help to expand the pool of local entrants and to reach beyond "old money" families to the rising middle class who yearn for a U.S.-style education and who are

5. For details on American schools around the world, see the Web site of the U.S. State Department's Office of Overseas Schools, http://www.state.gov/m/a/os/.

willing to pay substantial sums for it, but who cannot afford the exorbitant costs that cash-strapped schools are forced to charge to make ends meet.

- Support the development of U.S.-style universities throughout the Muslim world through enhanced distance-learning facilities, provision of books and supplies, educational training grants, and the like. The long-term goal should be the creation of at least one fully accredited English-language university in every country. The fact that new, U.S.-style, English-language universities are opening throughout the Muslim world—Kuwait's is the most recent, scheduled to begin instruction in September 2004—is a trend to be embraced and cultivated. Given the heightened security concerns about foreign students in the United States, combined with a financial crunch that forced a cutback in foreign Muslim and Arab students in the United States well before September 11, promoting U.S.-style universities in Muslim countries is an especially smart idea.

- Promote the distribution in Muslim countries of overstock U.S. textbooks and academic materials. Current law provides for tax breaks for book publishers to donate overstocks, but the number of books that make their way to Arab or Muslim countries is shockingly low.[6]

- Integrate the U.S. private sector, especially U.S. companies operating abroad, in English-language promotion. This could range from developing incentive programs that promise postgraduation employment for students who complete certain coursework or technical training to providing tax incentives to corporations that provide financial

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6. For details of tax exemptions and one overseas book-distribution program, see the Sabre Foundation, http://www.sabre.org.

support to book-purchasing initiatives, English-language programs, or scholarship funds in their local overseas communities.

Even a long list of initiatives such as this (and the list could be much longer) will only touch a relatively small number of students at all ages. But just as Islamists enjoy a reputation for providing efficient social welfare services far beyond the actual reach of people that receive such services, so, too, will the example of successful English-language programming attract admirers far beyond the actual number of students that directly benefit from it. And along the way, the United States will have invested in the next generation of Muslim allies to carry on the campaign to limit the appeal of Islamism.

A Diplomacy of Doing

There is a tendency to see public diplomacy as mainly talking: whether through radio broadcasts, speaker programs, or print publications and the like. That is about as inadequate a view of public diplomacy as demarching foreign governments is of traditional diplomacy. To be effective, public diplomacy requires action—assertive, aggressive, creative efforts to engage foreign publics, nurture friends, empower allies, build future supporters, and undercut the leverage of America's adversaries. To succeed against as wily and sophisticated a challenge as Islamism requires resorting to means not usually the hallmark of traditional diplomacy. These means include more public-private partnerships, for example, and the encouragement of a more entrepreneurial, risk-taking, opportunistic, and decentralized way of doing business by America's embassies and diplomats.

This, in turn, will require changes from the current pattern

of foreign service recruitment, education, training, and place-
ment. Indeed, to a great extent, a successful public diplomacy
campaign against Islamism means a throwback to the days
before all diplomacy was directed from Washington, to the era
when embassies and diplomats were active, frontline agents
in the advance of American national interests. Only a diplo-
matic corps imbued with mission, charged with action, and
unleashed from bureaucracy can win the friends and allies
America needs to triumph in the battle to curtail the appeal of
Islamism.