Public Arts

11 Déjà Vu: The ABCs of Public Diplomacy in the Middle East

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There is a good deal of talk and hand-wringing about the "hearts and minds" problem in the global war on terrorism. Even Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld has ruminated over the matter, dropping some of his famous snowflakes on his staff in asking that a better job be done with respect to the nonmilitary aspects of the challenge. Rumsfeld is rightly concerned not only with dispatching this generation's terrorists but also with short-circuiting the processes that are producing the terrorists of the future.

Secretary Rumsfeld is probably right to worry that the United States and its allies are not doing a thorough job on what the Pentagon calls the nonkinetic aspects of the war on terrorism. In some areas, such as monitoring and interrupting the flow of money to terrorist organizations, some progress has been made. But in others, such as education reform and U.S. public diplomacy, it is not clear how much has been

achieved. It may even be that in the public diplomacy domain, the United States has gone backward.

But how to tell, and what to do? It is difficult to generalize from anecdotes; polls are often unreliable; and no one has yet collected, collated, and analyzed all the relevant data. All of that needs to be done. Meanwhile, however, it is possible to sketch out the basic dos and don'ts of a public diplomacy campaign, because such campaigns have been designed and implemented before—by others in the Middle East and by Americans elsewhere. So, before we get to the question of whether to go with satellite television alongside FM radio, or whether to emphasize American pop culture or America's traditions of tolerance, or whether this Gallup poll or that Zogby survey tells the real story, we have to remind ourselves, on a fundamental level, what public diplomacy has been and should be about.

Learning from France (Yes, Really)

As suggested above, the "hearts and minds" problem in the Middle East is not a new one. Every non-Muslim authority that has projected power into the Middle East has faced the problem of winning Muslim hearts and minds. This is because the projection of non-Muslim power into that part of the world has always been suspect in Muslim hearts and minds, often with good cause. Past episodes of Western public diplomacy, successful and not, offer both edification and some entertainment—and where better to begin a potted history of public diplomacy in the Middle East than in the Mediterranean Sea in 1798?

In that year, Napoleon invaded Egypt. On one of the approaching French ships, there was, of all things, an Arabic printing press. While en route, Napoleon ordered a broadsheet

to be printed on that press for distribution. The points he wanted to make have an oddly familiar ring. "You will be told," read the broadsheet, "that I have come to destroy your religion; do not believe it! Reply that I have come to restore your rights, to punish the usurpers, and that more than the Mamluks, I respect God, his Prophet, and the Qur'an."

To drive home the point of his empathy for the Muslims, Napoleon added this evidence of sincerity: "Did we not destroy the Pope, who said that war should be waged against the Muslims? Did we not destroy the Knights of Malta, because those insane people thought God wanted them to wage war against the Muslims?" If Napoleon had hired speechwriters, he could not have paid them too much.

Not only were the French going to show friendship to Islam, or at least to claim it, they were also going to promote a revolutionary thing called equality. But they would do so in a way that presumed to be consistent with Islam. "All men are equal before God," said Napoleon's proclamation. "Wisdom, talents, and virtue alone make them different from one another." Here was the first stab at democracy promotion. (Of course, the French also warned that any villages that did not surrender would be burnt to the ground, but that's another matter.)

There is a good deal more in the 1798 French declaration to the Muslims, and every aspiring public diplomacy officer should master it. In this foundation statement of Western public diplomacy, diplomacy officers will find the two key talking points of any effective campaign already in mature readiness: promise to use your power to pursue enlightened ends that will benefit Muslims, and profess absolute respect for Islam.

There is a second famous instance of Western public diplomacy toward the Muslim world that deserves careful attention. During the First World War, France and Britain (and

Russia) faced a serious problem: the Ottoman sultan, who was also the Caliph of the Islamic world and, not insignificantly, an ally of Germany, issued a jihad proclamation against them. The proclamation was circulated in every Muslim language, much like an Osama bin Laden video is circulated today by other means. The sultan's proclamation pointed out, "He who summons you to this great holy war is the Caliph of your noble Prophet."

At the time, all three of the aforementioned Entente powers ruled over subject Muslim peoples in the millions, and naturally, they feared the prospect of uprisings. In response, Britain and France launched very sophisticated public diplomacy campaigns. Muslim notables were persuaded to certify that the Entente powers allowed Muslims complete freedom of religion. The British and French also made strenuous efforts to get out the word that the sultan's call to jihad was not genuine. It was, they claimed, not really the work of the Caliph but of the Young Turk regime acting at German suggestion. The proclamation, they insisted, was a fake "holy war made in Germany."

But the big coup came for the Entente powers when the British persuaded the sharif of Mecca, a descendant of the Prophet, to raise the standard of revolt against the Ottoman caliph in Mecca itself. All in all, this worked very well. The Allies had very little trouble from their Muslim subjects throughout the war. The lessons for us today should be clear: Get Muslims with the best Islamic pedigree on your side, and try to line up whoever has the say in Mecca.

In World War II, the "hearts and minds" problem returned. Indeed, the British had an even bigger problem in the 1930s and 1940s than they had had twenty years earlier. Large portions of Muslim, and especially Arab, opinion were

pro-Axis. Many Arabs thought the British had betrayed promises of independence made during the previous war—perhaps because Hitler hosted the Mufti of Jerusalem in Berlin, claiming just that. The leading German orientalists were summoned to translate *Mein Kampf* into Arabic, cutting out all the parts about Semites that might offend the Arabs.

This was real trouble brewing. So the British launched yet another public diplomacy campaign, predicated on the idea that Britain had more respect for Islam than any other European power. How could they demonstrate that respect in a tangible way? Build a mosque, which is how the Regent's Park Mosque in London began—as a piece of wartime propaganda.

Lord George Ambrose Lloyd, as secretary of state for the colonies, proposed the idea when war broke out, and in 1940 Winston Churchill's war cabinet put up the money to buy the site. In 1944, King George VI officially opened the Islamic Center in Regent's Lodge. In the British archives, there is file after file of press releases, radio broadcast transcripts, flyers, and brochures about the mosque to be built in London. This was quite slick stuff, and for those tasked with similar duties today, it is well worth reviewing.

When the war ended, the urgency of the mosque project faded. Indeed, the mosque itself did not get built for another thirty years. But the plan to build it served its purpose. The lesson for a Western leader today? Get thee to a mosque. Do not just profess respect for Islam; get out and show it. A year ago, an Islamic Society of North America conference was broadcast on C-SPAN. When a speaker mentioned that Queen Elizabeth had entered a mosque recently and had taken her shoes off before doing so, the audience burst into spontaneous applause. Apparently, demonstrations of respect work.

Remedial Americans

The point from this very short history is clear: other powers have done the "hearts and minds" drill before, and done it successfully. To a considerable degree, we have been there and done that. The basic components of a public diplomacy campaign to win Muslim hearts and minds are clear enough. So, why do Americans appear to be so determined not to understand them?

The main reason is that the Cold War made it too easy for the United States, just as it came into its own as a Middle Eastern power. America's adversary for over forty years was the godless, clumsy, cumbersome and downright ugly Soviet Union. Soviet commissars ruled over Muslims directly, while the God-fearing United States did not. Those commissars busied themselves with shutting down mosques and keeping Muslims from performing the hajj. It mattered not one whit how many times the Soviets sent KGB-appointed muftis to Cairo and Damascus to say that Muslims enjoyed religious freedom under Communist rule; no one in the Arab world believed it. The Soviets could offer all sorts of enticements, from MIG jet fighters to high dams, but Moscow could never erase the stigma of its reputation for hostility to religious faith. Moreover, the Saudis were themselves zealous in leading an Islamic campaign against atheistic communism, culminating in the jihad against the Russians in Afghanistan.

As long as the United States was up against the Soviets, it did not have to spend a lot of effort burnishing America's reputation as a friend of Islam. If the enemy of thine enemy is thy friend, then the United States walked in clover in the Muslim world so long as the Soviet Union existed. In retrospect, it is clear that all that changed a decade ago when the Soviet Union folded. But it took September 11 to bring home the two

truths that now compel the United States to run a serious public diplomacy campaign in the Muslim world.

The first truth is now that the United States is the only great power, everyone everywhere who has a propensity to fix blame for problems on an external power is fixing it on the United States. That propensity is endemic in the Arab and Muslim worlds; because the British, the French, and the Russians are now all in the second tier of powerful nations, all the free-floating hostility of a wounded civilization is fixing itself on the United States. America stands out all too visibly, just as the World Trade Center did; all the other powers are just so many Chrysler buildings. Whatever the Russians do in Chechnya, or the Indians do in Kashmir, or the Chinese do in Xinjiang, the United States will remain the most hated of all powers. Most Americans did not realize that before September 11; they realize it now.

The second truth is that friendly Muslim governments that used to do the public relations job for America in their general neighborhood either are not doing it any longer, or are ineffective at it. For many years, the United States relied on Saudi Arabia to provide Islamic cover. But the Saudi spell—that "protector of the holy places" halo—is beginning to wear off. The religious zeal in Saudi society remains, but the royals can no longer fire it like a missile at whatever target they choose. Instead, the royals themselves seem to have become the primary target.

The Saudis will use what is left of whatever magic charms they possess to protect themselves. To judge from the current state of things, there probably will not be much left over for America. If one were to give a title to the final chapter of a book about how the United States relied on Muslim governments to provide Islamic cover, that chapter might aptly be called "15 of the 19." The meaning of September 11, put sim-

ply and starkly, is that the United States now has no choice but to do public diplomacy for itself. The end of the Soviet Union has supplied the problem in a new shape, and the end of Saudi cover has provided the need for a new solution.

This is a sad situation, perhaps, but not one beyond saving. American public diplomacy does not have to reinvent the wheel. It should take a page or two from the successful episodes in the history of the European powers. There is plenty to learn about what those tasked with managing big empires with lots of Muslim subjects did right. There is also much to learn from their mistakes.

American officials can also learn from their own experience. The United States did very well with public diplomacy during the Cold War. The present context is different: Poles and Russians and Czechs are not the same as Iranians, Uzbeks, and Yemenis. Yet some of that experience is relevant. Add to it a dash of American can-do optimism, some of the latest gadgetry, and a serious budget, and the United States will have pretty much all it needs. Almost.

The Three Nos

So much for what the United States should have and should do. There are three things, however, that it should not have or do—things that need to be avoided at all costs. These three things must be mentioned, because even as Americans seem busy ignoring the relevant history—that of others and their own—some are making directional noises in the emerging discourse of public diplomacy that need to be squelched. If the United States goes down these roads, it will surely fail.

First, the United States must not confuse public diplomacy with policy making. This confusion comes in two forms. The

less dangerous form is the argument that the best way to pursue a successful public diplomacy is simply to alter American policy to make it that much easier to sell. This argument obviously confuses ends with means. There would be no need for public diplomacy if policies were easy to sell, and, just as obviously, diplomacies that are hard to sell can still be very much the right diplomacies. The purpose of public diplomacy may be formulated in a single phrase: to persuade foreign peoples to support, accept, or at least acquiesce to policies that, at first blush, they are likely to dislike, resent, or oppose.

To achieve this goal requires working in the teeth of what marketers call sales resistance. That has to be acknowledged as a given. American foreign policy is the product of a complex process; it is the job of the public diplomacy officer not to lament the outcome of the process but to sell the end product (and to do so without dwelling on its defects when presenting it to customers). Put another way, *policy is not there to create leeway for public diplomacy; public diplomacy is there to create leeway for policy*.

As fundamental and obvious as this point is, the public diplomacy function itself can become bureaucratically entrenched, and thus entrenched it will conceive itself to have its own interests. In light of this danger, the job of the real policy makers is to give public diplomacy its reading assignment and to keep it on the same page.

Confusing public diplomacy with policy making is the less dangerous of the two, precisely because it is so obvious. The second and more dangerous confusion could arise from putting the public diplomacy apparatus too close to the decision-making apparatus. Just such a confusion has been proposed by the Council on Foreign Relations' task force on public diplomacy, which recommends creating something parallel to the National Security Council for public diplomacy. The Dje-

rejian Report proposes something similar, in the form of a new White House office to manage and coordinate public diplomacy.

No doubt, there should be someone near the Oval Office who can tell the president that it is not a good idea to use the word crusade in dealing with anything Middle Eastern. It would also be a good thing to have the occasional estimate of how a proposed course of action might affect Arab or Muslim public opinion—although the room for error in such assessments is enormous. But it is simply dangerous to put public diplomacy considerations too close to the policy-formulating machinery, because public diplomacy could then become a virtual interest group representing foreign opinion. Although that is the legitimate role of foreign embassies, the State Department's foreign contacts, and perhaps some of the ethnic lobbies that line K Street, putting public diplomacy smack in the middle of the Old Executive Office Building is to overprivilege foreign opinion in policy making, which is not the best idea in a democracy.

The second path to be avoided is this: Do not turn public diplomacy into an instrument for the domestic promotion of the multicultural ideal. In the United States, there has been a manifest temptation to do this, and it is a truly terrible idea. Arabs who live in Tunis or Damascus do not need to be convinced that Muslims in the United States can live happy and fulfilling lives as Muslims; they already know that. Anyway, it has nothing to do with promoting U.S. policy goals in the region.

The kind of distortion to which the multicultural idea gives rise has already twisted some aspects of homeland security. Anyone who has flown across an ocean on an airplane recently knows that certain "security" procedures are really rituals meant to affirm the multicultural ideal that we are all

as one—and thus, we are all equally likely to be terrorists. This is nonsense, but the same potential exists in public diplomacy, which could too easily end up being an affirmative action or empowerment program for Arab-Americans. This may or may not be an end worth pursuing, but even if it is, public diplomacy is not the place to pursue it.

Public diplomacy, like homeland security, should be about getting the job done. If it can appease the gods of multicultural diversity along the way, fine—but that is not its main objective. If doing so *becomes* a primary objective, such concern for diversity will invariably produce a message that is muddled by diverse messengers. The United States needs to put out a message that is clear and unambiguous. The American ritual of presenting every possible perspective—in this case, to Arabs and Muslims in the Middle East—will leave friends isolated and bewildered and enemies dangerously confused. To the extent that the U.S. government has been guilty of such error in the past three years accounts for the counterproductive consequences of public diplomacy efforts thus far.

The third situation to avoid is an inverted structure for public diplomacy that would have Americans listening to Middle Easterners as much as or more than persuading them. This danger is implicit in the name "public diplomacy," for what is diplomacy if not a process of give and take that ultimately ends in compromise?

This belief is a popular error. The Council on Foreign Relations study, mentioned earlier, recommends "listening tours" for special panels, for example. Of course listening is important, but there is already an apparatus—American embassies and intelligence organizations—in place for that. If public diplomacy simply adds one more layer of reportage about foreign opinion, then it will have been a wasted opportunity. The point is to get the message out—to make the *other* guy listen.

Getting that message out is probably the most difficult aspect for public diplomacy to insure, because "dialogue" and "exchange" and "people-to-people" are all parts of the lexicon of public diplomacy. But one of the lessons of September 11 is that there has been too much "people-to-people"—including very free movement of people—and not enough direct persuading. The United States is not going to win hearts and minds by listening to someone complain about America and then giving him a visa.

Unfortunately, some of the initiatives now under consideration in U.S. government circles do not seem to amount to much more than that. The mere experience of America is insufficient to inoculate against anti-Americanism—we know this from numerous cases, from Sayyid Qutb to Muhammad Atta. The only possible inoculation is a steady and relentless irradiation of the Arab and Muslim worlds by a unified message, and every muscle and sinew of public diplomacy should be devoted to just that.

Road Work Ahead

At the end of the day, it may well be that public diplomacy will not make the United States loved and admired. No matter. It is no less important, and perhaps more important, that the United States be feared and respected. Indeed, no amount of explanatory verbiage emanating from Washington can substitute for the sure knowledge that the United States will defend its interests with vigor, regardless of what anyone thinks. So let us not have exaggerated expectations of public diplomacy. Public diplomacy can magnify the effect of a victory, but it cannot mitigate the effect of a defeat. In a war, even a somewhat unusual one, it is no substitute for winning.

Just ask Napoleon.