14 Relating to the Muslim World: Less Is More?

Ellen Laipson

Twenty-two years ago, Ramadan fell in the middle of summer, and I was residing in Rabat, Morocco, doing research and enjoying the opportunity to live in a Muslim country of great charm and beauty. I had no formal link to the U.S. embassy. However, as a courtesy to me as a Library of Congress employee, I was allowed some office space at the U.S. cultural office, part of what was then called the U.S. Information Agency—since integrated into the Department of State.

The USIA office was in a modest downtown office building that happened to be close to the cultural office of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. To this day, I remember that USIA virtually shut down its programming during Ramadan, while the Soviets held a daily film program, allowing young people to spend an hour in a cool dark place off the shimmering sidewalks. The films were not memorable, to say the least. But as I sat in the Soviet cultural center, I wondered whether the access provided to these regular folk—decidedly not denizens

of the embassy cocktail circuit—would make a lasting impression on their political views.

Perhaps not. But it stimulated me to reflect on whether our own ideas of outreach are too elitist and whether our tradition of respecting others' religion actually cuts us off from benign interactions with people of different faiths. In the years after my visit, the U.S. cultural office moved to the affluent suburbs for security reasons; even fewer Moroccans now have access to films, libraries, or cultural activities sponsored by the U.S. embassy. Today, too, we hear of U.S. reluctance to be visibly associated with secular or missionary schools in the Muslim world, out of fear of offending local sensibilities. In addition, many American nongovernment organizations and embassies struggle to interact in a normal way with "moderate" Islamists without running afoul of all the new antiterrorism rules and regulations.

The secretary of state, meanwhile, hosts elaborate *iftar* receptions with Muslim ambassadors, and the president has learned to send end-of-Ramadan greetings to Muslim Americans and to Muslim leaders around the world. The United States has much goodwill and good intentions to do the right thing by Muslim friends and partners, but there is clearly a lot of confusion and fumbling, too.

How do we get it right? Is it possible to be fair, open, and honest and have our message understood as transmitted? Or are our efforts to communicate officially with Muslim societies doomed to fail because our own cultural norms are so different from Islamic ones, and because of the agitated state of mind that many, if not most, Muslims have toward the United States these days?

The New Context of Public Diplomacy

I believe we have serious problems on both the sending side and the receiving side of public diplomacy. We need now to reflect carefully on how much, if any, of the critical society-to-society communication can be managed by government. In the information age, after all, it is increasingly difficult to keep different kinds of messages in distinctly separate channels. Governments have many information-related policies and strategies: there is information generated by the bureaucracy for internal deliberations on policy; there is information in the official exchanges of diplomacy and intelligence prepared to convince allies or to bully adversaries; there is occasionally information deliberately altered to influence a foreign population (psychological operations or propaganda); and then there is the regular press function, with information prepared to inform the American public and the American media about the government's policies and activities. I believe that the information revolution has made it virtually impossible to keep these channels separate. Information moves too fast, and there is much greater transparency in government operations than there used to be. The result is that a message designed for a particular audience is now instantly available to a global audience. It is no longer possible to fine-tune a message for a distant Muslim audience and not have your political rivals at home know about it. It is equally difficult to share with the American public a policy's nuances without having it dissected in salons in Cairo and Karachi.

Public diplomacy, therefore, is an anachronism in today's world, and as such, it is probably doing more harm than good. The transparency required in our own society clashes directly with the notion of manipulating perceptions and opinions. For successful manipulation to occur, you must *appear* to be doing

something sincere and straightforward. But in today's world, we talk in real time about why and how our government functions; one cannot publicly acknowledge that we are "spinning" our stories without that acknowledgment having an effect on the target of the spinning.

Would it not make more sense, therefore, to expand the press and information capacity to work in a more direct and honest way in talking about our policies and, yes, their shortcomings? Couldn't our press spokesmen take on a bit of additional work, giving more background and explanation of our policies, as opposed to the highly condensed sound bites they are expected to provide? Couldn't our media be staffed by people who can retrieve, on request, additional data or background on our policies and their impact?

Public diplomacy as conceived and ridiculed during the Bush administration has been too close to the marketplace and not nearly close enough to the underlying logic of our policies. By admitting that the government was importing some Madison Avenue techniques, we revealed too much of an inclination to our own crass thinking—that policies are commodities that must appeal to the current fads of consumers. The Madison Avenue approach undermined the more noble and often contradictory struggles behind policies that may not please everyone but that nevertheless embody our national aspirations and our democratic processes.

Public diplomacy toward the Muslim world also contains many other pitfalls. Muslims in general and Arabs in particular can distinguish between American consumer goods they like and American official policies they loathe. But we act as if we are surprised that consumers of our goods don't like us after all. We have also conflated the pro-Americanism that may exist in the Muslim world, often very superficially, with support for other aspects of American culture and power. We

need to understand the complex attitudes toward us in a more nuanced way. We should not try to label people in the region; it is an insult to them and to our own political culture, which professes to have high tolerance for political disagreement.

Missing the Mark

There are at least three specific respects in which our efforts to communicate with Muslim audiences from official platforms have missed the mark: economics, the pace of change, and the role of religion in public life. Let's take a quick look at each.

Economics

When we try to commoditize our foreign policy for Muslims, we show glaring insensitivity to prevailing views about economic values. In mainstream American political discourse, free elections and free markets are equally important principles. For Muslim believers, however, the allocation of resources needs to address social justice, which resembles an economic model probably closer to European social democratic party positions than to American capitalism. Muslims may be able to embrace some, even many, of the core political concepts we hold dear, but preaching capitalism to societies with already distorted markets and income distributions—and with rampant poverty—may not make sense to most Arabs. It sets us up for a policy failure.

Of course, there are many capitalists in Muslim societies who have thrived due to their entrepreneurial skills and their business acumen. They are important members of the political and social elite in Egypt, Syria, North Africa, and Pakistan. Sometimes these capitalists become advocates for economic reforms because they are more attuned to the need to adapt to new EU policies, for example, or because they see opportuni-

ties in seeking free trade agreements with the United States. But when we think about the broader malaise in the Muslim Middle East, we are often talking about the part of the population that has not benefited from the profits of the private sector. New linkages between our capitalist system and Arab economic elites would not foster greater sympathy or support for U.S. policies among the ranks of the unemployed.

If we are truly open to an agenda for change in the region, as the Bush administration has declared, then we must be in a listening mode. Demand for change in the Arab world or in the large Muslim societies of southern Asia does not even remotely mean that would-be reformers or democrats would choose the American model, which has no social safety net, underfunded retirement programs, and no universal health care. Instead, agents for change who may be our best partners on the political side may have quite different ideas about how to distribute and share a state's wealth and its foreign aid revenues. It is important that we show some flexibility and tolerance; a relentless drumbeat extolling the virtues of the Washington consensus on market economics will not serve our broader goals in the Muslim world.

Timing

We also miss each others' signals when it comes to matters of timing. Americans are impatient and want to measure attitudes of the moment. Our public diplomacy bureaucrats want to know how people in other countries are reacting to our "message" so that they can fine-tune it for the next poll, or even for the next day's news cycle. But attitudes in nondemocratic societies, where most Muslims live, are not easily changed. Cynicism from living with hypocritical rulers does not easily dissipate, as is evident in post-Saddam Iraq. The would-be democrats of the Muslim world have acquired some

deeply ingrained beliefs about how the world works, and these beliefs cannot be shaken quickly with a few advertisements or articles.

We must reconcile ourselves to the fact that attitudes and behavior do not change quickly and that our efforts to manipulate or change deeply ingrained beliefs and experiences are often feckless. If attempted in culturally inappropriate ways, these efforts can do more harm than good and, in so doing, can feed the region's robust proclivity to conspiracy theories. For example, in our saturated information market, there is enormous pressure to have "news" of change in Iraq that actually misinforms world publics about how change truly does occur.

Religion in the Public Sphere

We do a poor job communicating about religion in public and about the ties between religion and state. Clearly, across the Muslim world, theologians and independent thinkers are in a fierce and important debate on this issue. There is a wide range of issues and opinions: Should clergy be employees of the state? Have Iran's clerics been given, or taken, too much authority in matters of state? How should new constitutions address religion in societies where not all citizens are Muslim?

The United States, again, cannot claim to have the answers to such questions. Americans are raised with a myth about the separation of church and state, but our behavior suggests considerable confusion on the point. We have had presidents, including George W. Bush, who are deeply religious and speak of their beliefs in ways that can alienate or offend citizens who hold different beliefs, or who do not believe the president should see his official duties as having any religious content whatsoever.

Meanwhile, the secretary of state invites Muslim diplo-

mats to the formal diplomatic rooms at the Department of State to celebrate the breaking of the fast on Ramadan. At first glance, many are pleased, even touched, at this gesture of cultural goodwill to the world's Muslims. But such a gesture seems strange, even patronizing, as a public demonstration of respect for a religious rite. Would it not be simpler and truer to our own principles to be consistent with respect to defining religion as a private matter? All that a liberal, Lockean state needs to do is create and preserve an environment in which there is freedom of religion and tolerance for all. Wouldn't that be the most appropriate U.S. message for the Muslim world?

Other Ways to Communicate

I am not suggesting that engaging with Muslim societies is too hard or should not be a goal of U.S. policy. I am simply suggesting that "public diplomacy" is not the way to do it. If one considers the current structure of the State Department, there is an undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs, with three bureaus reporting to that senior official (the Charlotte Beers position, vacant for many months until filled briefly by Margaret Tutweiler). The three bureaus that report to the undersecretary run important and useful programs that permit interaction with diverse groups in Muslim societies. There are cultural and educational programs, media exchanges, training opportunities, and more. I would reallocate the funding of this part of the State Department to maximize impact on the long-haul issues, education in particular. I would phase out the more questionable public diplomacy activities that have generated controversy with no discernible benefit to the United States.

For example, our press activities should be expanded. We

should help new foreign media establish professional standards—a worthy contribution as countries even in the more closed parts of the Muslim world make the transition from government monopolies on news and information to the wider world of open information.

If we are open to changing our ways of engaging with the Muslim world in the hopes of avoiding further estrangement, we also need to grapple with the elitism of our policies. More often than not, our programs are looking for winners, trying to scout out future leaders in whom to invest. This is true across a range of overseas activities that the U.S. government supports, with the notable exception of antipoverty programs and humanitarian relief activities. In diplomatic, educational, and military exchanges, we aim high. We are looking to invest in success, in individuals who may well emerge as a next generation of leaders and decision makers.

There is nothing inherently wrong with this policy, but it may not be sufficient as a communications strategy. Given the widening gap between haves and have-nots in Muslim societies, should we not also try to reach out to the populations that are vulnerable to hatred and despair and violence? Might a different kind of U.S. engagement help prevent the spread of suicide bombers? Former U.S. peace negotiators have expressed regret for neglecting civil society in Israel and Palestine, the nonofficial populations that must minimally accept the governments' policies for those policies to succeed, even in nondemocratic places. One former negotiator, Aaron David Miller, now heads Seeds for Peace, the innovative program that brings teenagers from key conflict zones (Arab-Israel, India-Pakistan) to the United States to communicate and even form bonds of friendship. It is worth considering whether a restructuring of programming priorities from elites to a mix that includes more popular audiences, and young people in

particular, might not be the strategic investment that this particular historic juncture requires.

These modest ideas remain at a level of generality and cannot adequately address the deep divide that exists between the West and segments of Muslim society in a large group of countries. Generalizations can also cause harm by failing to recognize the enormous diversity of both American and Muslim societies. In the end, it is up to individuals to build the bridges and to find ways to communicate. In an increasingly interdependent world, more business partnerships, marriages, and friendships can be formed, and we should encourage and celebrate those ties. But governments do matter because they represent, for good or ill, the idea of a nation, the aspirations of a culture and its people. Our government has labored hard, and many individuals do so with great sensitivity and skill, but we need to look very closely at our policies and our style of communicating with the Muslim world. Perhaps it's time for our government to simplify and reduce the number of information initiatives it generates toward the Muslim world and to spend more time making sure its policies are wise and grounded in fairness and principle. Then the communication piece will follow naturally.