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To Win the “War on Terror,” We Must First Win the “War of Ideas”: Here’s How

By
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This article addresses the critical role that public diplomacy plays in improving the deteriorating image of the United States in the Muslim world. The authors argue that both public diplomacy and policies, including those on civil liberties, are vital to U.S. success in the war on terrorism and that the next U.S. president must designate this effort as a matter of highest national security importance. Many in the Muslim world believe that the war on terrorism is essentially a war on Islam; this view impedes the success of an effective foreign policy strategy. Previous efforts of public diplomacy have lacked funding, energy, focus, and an integrated strategy. The authors define six principles to improve America’s security through winning the war of ideas, including addressing civil liberties concerns, and engaging diverse constituencies in the Muslim world. Finally, the authors describe ten public diplomacy initiatives to improve U.S.–Muslim world relations.

Keywords: public diplomacy; U.S. foreign policy; war on terror; Muslim world; national security

The current National Security Strategy of the United States, issued by President George W. Bush in March 2006, states that winning the “battle of ideas” is the key to long-term success

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in the war on terrorism (White House 2006, 14). Unfortunately, we are losing that battle.

During the past few years, America’s standing across the world in general, but in the Muslim world in particular, has sustained a deep and rapid deterioration. According to the Pew Global Attitudes Survey, 80 percent of citizens of predominantly Muslim countries have solidly negative views of the United States. It is important that their anger is not with America’s values; rather, American policy is identified as the main cause of the negative sentiments—ranging from the war in Iraq, to abandoning the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, to the perceived abandoning of civil liberties values in our detention centers in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib (Pew Global Attitudes Project 2005).

Negative ratings are even higher in the key moderate countries of Jordan, Morocco, and Turkey (Telhami 2007; Pew Global Attitudes 2006). Yet inexplicably, out of an already small federal budget of about \$1.5 billion for core public diplomacy, only about 9.5 percent (\$140 million) is devoted to the Near East and South Asia, core areas of the Muslim world (U.S. General Accountability Office [GAO] 2006, 10). Meanwhile, 16 percent (\$240 million) is spent on the U.S.-sponsored satellite television and radio stations Al Hurra and Radio Sawa, which have limited following and limited impact (GAO 2006, 7).

By any measure, U.S. efforts at communicating with Muslim-majority nations since 9/11 have not been successful. They have lacked energy, focus, and an overarching, integrated strategy. Instead, the efforts have relied on informational programming that has lacked priority or been misdirected, lacked nuance in dealing with diverse and sensitive issues, and not reached out to the key “swing” audiences necessary to marginalize and root out violent extremists.

A critical pillar of success in the war on terrorism is restoring the world’s trust in America’s word. Fortifying this pillar should be a top priority of the new president, with a special focus on relations with the Muslim world. To win the war of ideas against those advocating violence against the United States, we must act quickly to rebuild the shattered foundations of understanding between the United States and predominantly Muslim states and communities.

For our efforts to be effective, the U.S. government must move beyond understanding the problem as simply a global popularity contest. The very success of American foreign policy depends on how the United States can engage with, and help shape the views and attitudes held by, foreign populations. Both how and with whom the United States speaks create the environment in which our policies sink or swim. Furthermore, central to the struggle in the global war of ideas is how the United States deals with issues of rights, respect, and liberties at home.

The Challenge

Analysts on both sides of the political aisle often describe the current challenge to the United States as a long-term conflict, akin to the cold war between the United States and the communist bloc. That conflict, like the current one, was waged both

in the realm of ideas and in the realm of hard security (Cohen 2001; Woolsey 2003). If this is a valid comparison, then at best we are no further along that we were before the Truman Doctrine and Marshall Plan in 1947, when we were still wrestling with the fundamental questions of who and what confronted us, and what should be the nature of our long-term response? At worst, we may be standing on the wrong side of such a historic comparison, as we are now the ones struggling against credibility and image problems similar to those of the former Soviet Union, so memorably characterized by President Ronald Reagan as “the evil empire.”

American efforts to defeat the Soviet Union and the broader communist bloc in the war of ideas during the cold war were also aided by our domestic efforts to confront racism at home.¹ A series of U.S. presidents realized that this transformation in our domestic policy at home greatly contributed to our foreign policy successes overseas, particularly the defeat of communism (Singer 2007). In 1958, for example, when an African American handyman was sentenced to die in Alabama for stealing \$1.95 in change, the Soviets seized on this story to tarnish our good name in the cold war battlegrounds in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. President Dwight Eisenhower’s secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, engaged Alabama governor James Folsom to commute the sentence—which Governor Folsom gladly did, having already received thousands of letters asking him to do so. By the time the United States emerged on the other side of the 1960s civil rights movement, it became increasingly equipped to be the beacon of hope, freedom, and justice to the world, particularly in Eastern Europe on the other side of the Iron Curtain.

In today’s digitally interconnected world, when behavior within the United States is more closely monitored by citizens around the globe, we are not faring so well. Many of those in the Muslim world are unsure whether to love us for our ideals of equality and freedom, or loath us for our practices (which contradict our ideas) in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. They are watching carefully, and in years to come, they could either move to being tacit supporters of those who resist America in the form of terrorism, or those who embrace America in free trade and political cooperation.

Indeed, we occupy a crucial period, when enduring attitudes are being formed. Getting our communications right is critical to overall national security now and in decades to come. Much of the threat we face comes from terrorists around the globe, often acting in a decentralized, self-inspired fashion. However, our security concerns extend beyond terrorism and suggest a longer-term need for a grand strategy to prevent a wider conflict in the future. The United States—and the world—may be standing on the brink of a “clash of civilizations,” as Samuel Huntington (1998) once warned. The view, widely held among Muslims, that the U.S. war on terrorism is a “war on Islam” illustrates the vast gulf in understanding and perceptions.

This prevailing view in the Muslim world impedes our success not only in mounting a viable grand strategy in our overall foreign policy but also in confronting localized threats. The global war on terrorism, after all, is not a traditional military conflict made up of set-piece battles; it is a series of relatively small wars and insurgencies in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Egypt—and even neighborhoods in Britain. In each case, the United States must sway a population from hostility to support to oust terror cells and shut down recruiting pipelines. As

the U.S. Marine Corps *Small Wars* manual famously notes, such “wars are battles of ideas and battles for the perceptions and attitudes of target populations” (United States Marine Corps Combat Development Command 2005, 79).

More than merely a lost popularity contest, then, the deepening divide between the United States and Muslim nations and communities around the world poses a huge barrier to our success on a breadth of vital issues, from running down terrorist groups to expanding economic development and political freedom. Progress on these issues will steer the next generation of Muslims toward or against militant radicalism.

The Fundamental Principles of Winning the “War of Ideas”

To win the war of ideas, the United States must clearly recognize the importance of America’s voice and good standing as elements of its power and influence in the world. As a matter of the highest national security importance, the next president should undertake a major, integrative initiative in public diplomacy and strategic communications to reach Muslim states and communities from Morocco to Indonesia, including Muslim minority communities in Europe and India.

This initiative should be of the highest national security importance and receive commensurate resources, in contrast to the current situation, where expenditures are less than 0.1 percent of our Iraq-related expenditures. The campaign as a whole should also be self-critical, regularly evaluating its own performance, and be ready and willing to change in response to evaluation results.

Six broad principles should guide our strategy to improve American security through winning the war of ideas and to and broaden and deepen relationships between American citizens and institutions and their counterparts abroad.

- *Confronting who we are:* America must clearly confront its civil liberties concerns at home and in operations abroad if we are to be able to inspire the Muslim world to support our vision of “liberty and justice for all” in the world. Additionally, we must take a zero-tolerance stand against comments and bias that reinforce the recruiting efforts of our foes. When anti-Muslim statements are made in government and among our political elite, they only help those who claim we are as undertaking a “war on Islam” instead of a war on terror.
- *Maintaining dialogue:* Instead of just producing propaganda, communications efforts should be audience-centered and designed to build dialogue, ensure mutual respect, forge partnerships, and place a premium on joint participation and planning. Maintaining two-way dialogue—emphasizing listening and learning as much as talking—is the only way to restore and secure damaged credibility.
- *Undertaking outreach:* Rather than merely “preaching to the choir,” the United States should engage a varied set of regional players and constituencies, including Islamists and other social conservatives who, while sometimes controversial, may carry the greatest influence within the target populations. Beyond traditional vehicles for discussion, which target government counterparts and standard news media, the communications should engage opinion leaders in a variety of forums, including universities, the arts, business and professional associations, labor groups, and nongovernmental organizations.
- *Working toward integration:* Diverse U.S. agencies should develop a coordinated goal-oriented, two-way communications approach to maximize effectiveness and resources and to speak with a single, credible voice.

- *Embracing nimble response*: Strategies and programs should be flexible and responsive to changing events, findings, and trends and should use new technologies and tactics.
- *Stressing resource investment*: The investment should reflect the very high strategic priority of the war of ideas in ensuring American security.

The success of any program begins with a central vision. The next administration should order a reexamination of public diplomacy and strategic communications goals and programs, to be carried out at the senior levels of the National Security Council and affected departments and agencies, especially the State Department. This effort should include seeking and integrating input from legislative bodies, universities, think tanks, and friends in the Muslim world. Good advice should be welcomed, not cast aside. (In the past, policy makers have ignored reports on the issue from groups as varied as the congressionally mandated Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy, the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Center for the Study of the Presidency.) To ensure both high-level support and durability, the main findings and recommended core strategy should be embodied in a national security presidential directive, presenting an agenda for building positive relations with Muslim countries and communities, using public diplomacy and strategic communications.²

With the strategic goals established, policy makers could then develop a more systematic approach to ascertain how far short the United States now falls from this target state and what exactly is required to attain it. This analytical and planning process will also identify tangible courses of action in the most important issue areas (e.g., alleviating the intensity of anti-Americanism in key countries, increasing levels of cooperation on antiterrorist activity, etc.). The objective is to create not merely a methodological approach to evaluating our successes and failures but also a guide to steer the right course in the future.

Many Muslims say they find the style and tone of communication often used by senior U.S. officials arrogant, patronizing, and needlessly confrontational. Unfortunately, they are right.

As important as the substance of the strategy is in rebuilding the shattered foundations of trust, it is time to get back our style as well. Many Muslims say they find the style and tone of communication often used by senior U.S. officials arrogant, patronizing, and needlessly confrontational. Unfortunately, they are right. Reinstating the art of diplomacy in our *public* diplomacy could have an

immediate impact. Within this, it is important to demonstrate respect: The empathic and measured tone that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice used after the alleged Koran desecration incident in 2005 is all too rare and should serve as a model. Cultural insensitivity, boasting, and finger-wagging, displayed by senior leaders on countless occasions, need to be avoided. Similarly, U.S. leaders should avoid displaying an openly hostile attitude toward the major Arab media outlets; like it or not, these channels are the means of conveying our message to the broader community, and attacking them only undermines our efforts.

Initial Remedies to Win the "War of Ideas"

In applying the six principles presented above, our administration can make significant progress toward winning the war of ideas and improving U.S. relations with the Muslim world through many interrelated initiatives. Following are ten suggestions that employ these principles.

1. *Exerting presidential leadership in civil liberties and reducing anti-Muslim bigotry.* In an age of globalized technology and communication, the world is watching to see if we live up to our civil liberties ideals. And just as in the cold war, when key battleground states in the developing world focused on civil rights in the United States, so today is the Muslim world watching to see how we respond to anti-Muslim bigotry at home. Efforts on these two fronts will determine if we have the moral authority to build multigovernment coalitions and the attraction to inspire hope rather than fear.

2. *Creating an America's Voice Corps.* Perhaps the most shocking finding of the 2006 Institute for National Strategic Studies' report on counterterrorism was that the State Department had only five Arabic speakers capable of appearing on Arabic-language television on behalf of the U.S. government to communicate with the approximately 300 million citizens of Arab countries (McMillan 2006). Presidential support is needed for the rapid recruitment and training of a corps of fully fluent speakers with public diplomacy/political advisory skills, who can adequately staff and support our broader operations. At a bare minimum, we should target a ratio of one speaker per million citizens in the key languages of Arabic, Urdu, Persian, Bahasa Melaya, and so on.

3. *Establishing American Centers across the region.* In the new war of idea, reaching out to young people is critically important for the long run, since many of the countries involved have a higher than normal percentage of their population under age twenty-five. The frustration that Muslim youth feel with the status quo could be harnessed into a demand for progressive reforms. U.S. foreign policy must be deeply engaged in developing a real sociopolitical alternative to offer this next generation. There is an historical model to emulate in reaching foreign youth and, indeed, citizens of all ages. After World War II, the United States

launched dozens of “America Houses” across Germany as focal points to build democracy and form a bond with the German people. Located in city and town centers, America Houses also served as community hubs. After forty years under American stewardship, many of these centers evolved into German-American institutes under private German control. Today, we should create the same sort of structure in every major city in the Muslim world, as well as in key minority communities in Europe (Amr 2005).

4. *Implementing an American Knowledge Library initiative.* The 2005 Report of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy also pointed out the dearth of Arabic translations of major works of American literature and political theory (U.S. Department of State 2005). While certain U.S. embassies do undertake translations of books into Arabic, the scale of these efforts is miniscule compared with the need.

5. *Privatizing al Hurra and Radio Sawa.* One of the few major U.S. public diplomacy initiatives in recent years was the launch of American government-organized satellite TV and radio stations, called al Hurra and Radio Sawa, broadcasting in Arabic. Despite their massive launch costs, which ate up much of the public diplomacy budget, neither has found its footing, and no credible study has found them to be influential among the populace. Their problem is not inadequate funding but rather the overt association with the U.S. government, which effectively de-legitimizes these media in the eyes of most Arabs. Moreover, al Hurra and Radio Sawa actually undermine broader reform efforts, as the United States is in no position to challenge Arab government control of media while itself running its own government-funded media there. America should have a voice in the region, but this voice will more likely be heard, and believed, if people understand that it is being transmitted through a nongovernment source (Cook 2004).

6. *Launching “C-SPANs” for the Muslim world.* At the same time, there is a need for credible, unfiltered media. Sources of pure information are sorely lacking throughout the Muslim world, even though there is a palpable appetite for them. For example, during the Abu Ghraib crisis, the public in the Middle East watched live coverage of U.S. congressional hearings on Arabic news channels with great interest. Scenes of American policy makers and military leaders directly answering the probing questions of legislators and reporters presented a powerful illustration of democracy in action as well as a sharp contrast to the authoritarian practices predominant in the region. The same can be arranged for bringing transparency to governance in the region (as well as providing a wider footprint for events organized by the American Centers).

7. *Bolstering cultural exchange programs while improving the visa process.* As in the cold war, when U.S. outreach programs created allies around the world, we should enlarge educational and cultural exchange programs; increase exchanges

of youth and young professionals; and support investments in development, technology, and science initiatives in the Muslim world. Not only should exchange initiatives such as the Fulbright and Humphrey programs be dramatically expanded with Muslim-majority countries, but also virtual youth exchanges, harnessing Internet and video-conferencing applications, should be initiated to multiply the effect. Current visa procedures impose onerous requirements and delays that humiliate rather than welcome Arabs and Muslims from abroad; in turn, the cumbersome procedures subvert efforts to reach out to our natural ambassadors—namely, visitors and students who can then attest to the depth and reality of American goodwill (Paden and Singer 2003). Special attention should also be given to integrating official visitors programs across agencies. All too frequent, high-profile visa delays and, in particular, the erroneous detention of officially invited leaders and representatives from the Muslim world have proved embarrassing and detrimental to America's image.³

8. *Harnessing America's diversity by engaging Arab and Muslim Americans.* At a time when the U.S. government lacks both credibility abroad and local language speakers to represent its views, the distance between our government and *domestic* Arab and Muslim communities is stunningly wide. The State Department's Office for Public Diplomacy, for example, did not include a single American Muslim on its staff until 2006. The Departments of Defense, Homeland Security, Justice, and State should all examine how they can better tap the strengths of these communities in recruiting. They must move beyond the symbolic, such as convening Iftar dinners during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, to real programming. To offer one example, just as political donors and corporate executives often join official travel delegations, Arab Americans and American Muslims could also help brief and even accompany officials when they visit the broader Middle East.

9. *Involving the whole federal bureaucracy in public diplomacy.* The war of ideas should be engaged by the entire federal bureaucracy. Leaders of the executive branch should conduct regular interviews with the foreign press and engage in genuine dialogue, even with those who hold negative views of our government. For example, visits by senior U.S. officials from any agency to the region should include meetings not merely with their counterpart government officials but also with local students, civil society leaders, reformers, and even conservative religious or social leaders. They should follow the cold war model of a wide engagement strategy to expand and deepen relationships with U.S. allies and counterparts in what were then considered "battleground states" in the developing world.

10. *Empower private citizens and local legislators to build their own productive international linkages.* The world is becoming increasingly interconnected and, with the proliferation of applications like YouTube, Second Life, and Facebook, the opportunities are ever expanding to empower legions of

Americans to build bridges of their own overseas. What is needed, however, is an office within the U.S. Department of State that is devoted to aiding such efforts to build partnerships, especially by sectors outside the Beltway, seeking to multiply the impact of private and government efforts as well as aid in breaking up any road blocks to exchanges.⁴

The Opportunity for the Next President

Much of the recent U.S. crash in credibility and standing in the Muslim world has focused on the actions of the current administration, with President Bush cited by name in various regional public polls, as well as conversations with key leaders. Fair or not, this focus on President Bush does present a limited window for his successor. The next president will have a unique opportunity to personally “reboot” the relationship between the United States and Muslim populations—and should seize upon it.

As a sign of the importance of relations with the Muslim world to our long-term security, full consideration should be given to including stops in Muslim states in the new president’s first international trip. There, the president could deliver a major policy address outlining goals and revealing a vision of future relations between the United States and the Muslim world, and could meet with forward-looking leaders, civil society reformers, and youth.

Continual presidential effort will be needed after the new administration’s initial weeks and months. According to the Pentagon’s Defense Science Board, “Only White House leadership . . . can bring about the sweeping [communications] reforms that are required,” and “nothing shapes U.S. policies and global perceptions . . . more than the President’s statements” (U.S. Department of Defense 2004, 3). Given the importance of the war of ideas to the battle against terrorism and the risks of a greater, long-term rift between the United States and the Islamic world, the next administration should make efforts to bring the president into personal contact with reform and civil society leaders. These efforts include hosting delegations at the White House to demonstrate respect and bolster both parties’ standing as well as understanding of each other. In addition, the president should schedule time for regular interviews with news media from the Muslim world.

Furthermore, the president should use the bully pulpit of the presidency to condemn hate speech. Shortly after 9/11, President Bush took the compelling personal step of visiting the Islamic Center of Washington, the capital’s leading mosque, to show Americans and the world that the administration understood that Islam was not to blame for the attacks. Unfortunately, the clarity of this message was quickly lost. A series of anti-Muslim statements were subsequently made by various people close to the administration.⁵ Even though media in the Middle East give extensive coverage to these statements, the administration consistently failed to condemn them or separate itself from the speakers. The next

president must not repeat this failure of leadership, as it weakens America’s moral standing. Bigotry in our midst is not just distasteful; in the age of globalization, it directly undermines our security. We live in an era where the world constantly watches to see whether we actually live up to our ideals. At a time when many in the world expect the worst of us, such statements only support the enemy’s propaganda and recruiting efforts.

The next president will inherit a series of complex and difficult decisions at the heart of the war on terrorism, about how to engage with Muslim states and communities and only a short window of opportunity to “reboot” the relationship. The tools of public diplomacy and strategic communications can be valuable weapons in America’s arsenal. It is not yet too late to wield them.

Notes

1. For example, on page 26 of Chinese dissident Li Cunxin’s *Mao’s Last Dancer* (2003), he wrote of his first trip to America as a Chinese exchange ballet dancer, “For so many years we had been told that the West, especially America, was evil. We’d heard of nothing but the mistreatment of black people, the violence on the streets and the use of firearms.”

2. The focus here is on public diplomacy and strategic communications involving the Muslim world. However, it can serve as a model for broader efforts aimed at restoring America’s leadership and credibility on a global basis.

3. For example, Ejaz Haider, the editor of one of Pakistan’s most moderate newspapers, was arrested in Washington, D.C., in 2003 by Immigration and Naturalization Service agents on visa charges, even though he was in the United States at the direct invitation of the State Department to build goodwill. Those sympathetic to the United States could only charitably conclude that one American hand did not know what the other was doing. Unsurprisingly, those less favorably inclined took a darker view and made sure to publicize their conspiracy theories in regional media.

4. For further reading on this, see Amr and Barnes (2007).

5. For example, Christian Coalition founder and Bush administration supporter Pat Robertson called Islam a “violent religion.” Similarly, Franklin Graham, an evangelist leader, called Islam a “very evil and wicked religion.” Likewise, Lt. General William Boykin set off a firestorm of attention in 2003 when, comparing his faith with a Muslim’s, he said, “I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol.” Boykin has since been promoted to deputy undersecretary of defense for intelligence.

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