



Institute for the Study of Diplomacy
Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service
GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

TALKING WITH THE ISLAMIC WORLD: IS THE MESSAGE GETTING THROUGH?

Executive Summary

In February, March, and April 2002, the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy sponsored a three-part program to examine the effectiveness of the United States in sending its message to the Muslim world. The point of departure was the finding that the United States was regarded more and more unfavorably abroad—around the world, but especially in the Muslim world—and that this disregard posed a threat to our interests in commerce, peace making, coalitions, and regional stability. A special effort was made to have participants from the region to report firsthand.

The panelists felt there were specific steps that we could take to make ourselves better understood but, in general, their view was that American policy is understood perfectly well—and disliked. While the panelists called for some policy shifts on the part of the United States, they also acknowledged that some of the difficulties in the image of America were rooted in Muslim anger and humiliation with their own economic, political, and

cultural structures—problems which could be dealt with only by Muslims over a longer period. The recommendations of the thirteen panelists were remarkably consistent and specific.

The panelists found that the problem of the American image in the Muslim world is serious and worsening. America's unilateral tendencies contribute to this, as does a Muslim sense of weakness in the face of America's superpower status. A strengthening of U.S. public diplomacy is called for but public diplomacy cannot sell the unsellable. For instance, U.S. policies regarding the Arab-Israeli struggle, the focus on terrorism to the exclusion of other issues, support of an international economic system that benefits the United States, and the dichotomy between American values at home and abroad are areas where policy should be examined with an eye to change.

Ways that the United States can sharpen its message are many. Most importantly, the U.S. government should talk more frequently, clearly, and directly to the

Muslim world, either through the foreign press centers or through its ambassadors in the region. Talk should be a dialogue, not one way, and should include our best messages: democracy, human rights, and successful market economies. Moderate Islamic organizations such as the Organization of Islamic Conference, al-Azhar, and others should be targeted. Long term exchanges are the best American investment.

The specific recommendations are contained below. Summaries of the panel proceedings and biographies of the participants are available on the ISD website: <http://data.georgetown.edu/sfs/programs/isd/>

ISD Associate and retired U.S. diplomat Marjorie Ransom wrote this summary of the three meetings convened under Institute auspices. The views and recommendations presented are those of the panelists and not the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy.

PANEL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENTS IN U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Relating to *media*

The U.S. government should do more with foreign media, rather than focus so much on the domestic press.

- Target Arab satellite media as their impact is outstripping official Arab governments' points of view.
- Direct more presidential statements to the Muslim world.
- Use the coalition spokesman in Islamabad as a model of U.S. response, e.g.,
 - reply to misinformation quickly;
 - strike down myths, such as the U.S. war on Islam;

- build on reasons for sympathy with the United States;
- publicize favorable developments;
- hold foreign leaders accountable and in case of Al Qaeda and the Taliban, culpable.

Move guidance faster to ambassadors and PAOs.

- Pay attention to guidance from our ambassadors abroad.
- Use the foreign press centers much more to reach the Muslim world.

- Coordinate better between military and civilian spokesmen in the United States.

The Middle East Radio Network (MERN), VOA's new Arabic service, may help with its FM band and youth-oriented news and music format, formatted to the different dialects of the various Middle East regions, but VOA should continue "telling America's story."

Relating to *dialogue*

Achieve an “inter-civilizational dialogue.”

- Create a new forum or channel to deal with an OIC (Organization of Islamic Conference), al-Azhar, and other moderate Islamic organizations.
- Create opportunities for American Muslims to communicate American values to the Muslim world.
- Talk to Muslim figures, including conservative ones.
- Insist that war with Islam is the invention of bin Laden, not the United States.
- Publicize Bush administration and other official U.S. initiatives toward Islam.

Listen more closely and show evidence of listening in public statements.

- Pain in the Muslim world is real: economies and politics are making this large

est of all world religions seem marginalized.

- Reduce “the superpower problem”—worldwide perception that the United States is unilateralist and arrogant.

Send our best messages abroad: democracy, human rights, and successful market economies.

Relating to *exchanges*

Take advantage of innumerable and compelling favorable American influences on Muslims.

- Highlight our products, medicine, education, investment opportunities, system of government, entertainment.
- Survey private exchange efforts (NGOs here and abroad) to augment and complement government exchanges.
- Invest much more in U.S. government exchanges, e.g.,
 - student/teacher exchanges;
 - international visitor programs;
 - cultural and art exchanges.
- Work to have Arabs understand us and show that we understand them.

Relating to *U.S. policy*

Stress elements of balance on Palestine problem: end of occupation, settlements, invasion, and lay out pathway to Palestinian state, plus ceasefire.

- Counterterrorism is not the only U.S. policy in the Middle East.
- Insist on the role of others—Arab and European.
- Show compassion with all victims, Arab as well as Israeli.
- Focus more on other Muslim issues—notably Kashmir and the Indian-Pakistani conflict. It is significant that India and Pakistan have one-third of the world’s Muslims.
- Keep talking about Kosovo and Bosnia.
- Make the goal of U.S. policy on Iraq the encouragement of a new regime that will play a responsible, beneficial role in the region and not just the elimination of weapons of mass destruction.
- Reduce the perception that U.S. policy causes pain to Iraqis, not to Saddam Hussein.
- Stress the rebuilding of Afghanistan and Indonesia.
- Develop a policy of Arab market integration, liberalization, and trade, that rivals in prominence our similar messages in Asia, South America, and Europe.

No one in the Arab or Muslim world regards U.S. policy as balanced on Palestine. All other regions of the world take the same view, if to a somewhat lesser extent. The panelists were unanimous in stating that the U.S. Israeli tilt is a major source of U.S. problems. They said that it begets terrorism, threatens moderate regimes, and is the cause of the erosion of cooperation with the United States in all areas. They claimed that the overwhelmingly bitter and angry Arab reaction is not the result of misinformation and said that public diplomacy cannot, by itself, reverse this problem. Engagement will help, but panelists said that policy shifts are needed.

Conclusion

The problem of the American image in the Muslim world is serious and growing. It is rooted partly in the challenge posed to other states by the overwhelming ascendancy of American power and influence in all areas and by the perceived inclination of the U.S. government, in these circumstances, to go it alone. This feeling is complicated and inflamed by

the sense of Muslim states that, as partners of the United States and even of each other, they are weak and unsuccessful.

However, some U.S. policies—like a lack of balance in the Arab-Israeli struggle, a failure to live up to our own ideals of democracy and human rights in supporting friends abroad, an inability to get

agreement with others on what constitutes terrorism, an apparent preference for military rather than diplomatic efforts to solve disputes, and our preference for an international trade and financial structure that clearly benefits us, but not so clearly others—are all areas of policy where shifts may be needed if we are going to overcome the dislike and criticism

we are getting around the world. All of these areas involve large and complicated questions where Americans differ with each other, as well as with others overseas, but the panelists say that our problems are hardly mere misunderstandings on the part of others. Our problems, in-

stead, come from a perfectly clear understanding of our policy by Muslim elites and others and a passionate rejection of these policies.

Under these difficult circumstances, it is necessary to vitalize our public diplomacy, giving it more money, more force-

ful direction, and more imagination. But public diplomacy, no matter how skillful and vigorous, can never sell the unsellable.

Description of the Panels

The three seminars examined

1) images in the Muslim world of U.S. actions and statements;

2) the role of the media in creating perceptions of the United States; and

3) how the U.S. government might project a more positive image.

During the first panel, *Jim Zogby*, president, Arab America Institute and head of the second largest Arab lobby, noted in particular that the problems we have stem from the view that the United States acts on its own, rather than multilaterally; he cited the Pew Research Center study, which said that 71 percent of opinion leaders in the Middle East believed this to be true. Zogby stressed that this was not much different from what people in Europe, Latin America, and Asia believed. Other reasons given by the Pew Research study for disliking the United States were, in rank order: U.S. policies that contributed to the growing gap between the rich and the poor; the growing power of the U.S. multinational organizations; and U.S. support for Israel. The last is a view held by 95 percent of the Middle East, but in Asia the view is held by 82 percent, in Latin America by 78 percent and in Western Europe by 68 percent.

Raghida Dergham, senior diplomatic correspondent for the influential London-based Arabic daily, *Al-Hayat*, drummed home this point repeatedly, insisting that the problems we have are not problems with how we explain ourselves, but fundamental differences on policy.

Dr. Akbar Ahmed, Ibn Khaldun Chair of Islamic Studies, American University, Washington, D.C., looked at many of these issues through an Islamic prism. Looking through that filter, he sees a great deal of pain in the Islamic world, not just from painful political situations, like Palestine, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Somalia, but from the negative image

of Muslims in the American media and movies. He feels that the culture of the West causes a constant sense of humiliation that flows into the Muslim community.

Ambassador Christopher Ross saw behind criticism of U.S. policy a great deal of support for America, a high regard in the Muslim world for American values of democracy, free expression, and religious tolerance. He said that for public diplomacy to work in the present situation, it had to go beyond the crisis response to September 11 and focus on these strategic strengths, as well as on education, to build more understanding.

The second panel looked at how American and foreign media present America.

John Alterman, Council of Foreign Relations Fellow at the U.S. Department of State, described the effect of U.S. media messages on the world: American news, which dominates world news, most often has a negative cast and its stories tend to focus on conflicts; negotiations are not news and get little coverage. Because technology has facilitated the emergence of a single global news ecosystem unrestricted by national borders, one result has been that governments no longer control the reporting of news. The U.S. government should understand and deal separately with disparate audiences—the domestic and the overseas audiences.

Masykuri Abdillah, Indonesian Fulbright scholar of Islamic law, stressed Muslim world antipathy to U.S. policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Afghanistan, and Iraq, but said that Indonesians accept not only U.S. science technology but democracy, pluralism, and human rights. He complained of a U.S. double standard in applying its standards overseas—preferring stability to democracy. While for him the major problem between the United States and the Muslim

world is U.S. policy towards the Middle East, American ignorance of world geography and Islam contributes to the problem. It is worsened by lack of understanding by Muslims of the United States. The media exacerbate this problem by reporting world events incorrectly; bad reporting has caused bad feelings in both Muslim countries and the United States. Efforts must be made to overcome these problems: dialogue, educational programs, such as Fulbright scholarships, and gestures on the part of the U.S. government, such as the White House's celebration of the Islamic holiday Id al-Fitr.

Ms. Deniz Enginsoy, Washington bureau chief for the Anatolian News Agency, stressed that Turkey is quite different from other Islamic nations in its approach to the war on terrorism. Unlike the majority of Muslims, a majority of Turks supports the U.S. war on terrorism. Still, a significant minority oppose it, deny that Osama bin Laden was responsible for the 9/11 attacks, and note that while Bush emphasizes that this is a war against terrorism and not Islam, all the targets are Islamic. She suggested that America "show its compassionate face." Support for education and economic aid would pay dividends. She said it would be a great help if the U.S. took the lead in peace efforts in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. While the Turkish government might reluctantly support military action to oust Saddam Hussein, Turks would also see such action as a threat to Turkey's economy.

Dr. Mohamed Said, U.S. bureau chief of the prestigious Egyptian daily, *Al-Ahram*, said that no amount of public relations can alter Arab's resentment over what is seen as blind American support for Israel and its repressive policy towards Iraq. He said that not just Arabs but Indians and even Europeans oppose U.S. policy towards the Middle East, but still have

4 warm feelings towards America and its culture. He suggests bringing international politics close to the people because “Americans have a tremendous society.”

The third panel studied how to project a positive American image.

John Dwyer, coordinator for international information programs (IIP), U.S. Department of State, emphasized two things: the event of 9/11 and the response—both diplomatic and personal—that the State Department had taken in the last several months. He mentioned a new web site highlighting Muslim life in America and the publication, “Network of Terrorism” and said that the department has expanded the Fulbright scholars program, English language teaching and teacher training in the Middle East.

Mouafac Harb, news director for the Voice of America’s new Middle East Radio Network, said that MERN wants to reach the 60 percent of the Arab population that is under the age of thirty. It will focus on news and music and project a regional image.

Kenton Keith, senior vice president, Meridian International Center and former U.S. Ambassador to Qatar, focused his remarks on his recent tenure as coalition spokesman in Islamabad. He described

the lessons he had drawn from his experience. The United States has to show up and have sufficient public diplomacy resources. There must be better coordination between civilian and military public diplomacy efforts. We should seek and embrace coalition. We must broaden and deepen the dialogue between Americans and Muslims. The effort must be long term. According to Keith, one of the most effective means of dialogue is through exchange programs. In that vein, he recommended major exchange initiatives between the United States and the Islamic world.

Rami Khouri, Jordan-based syndicated political columnist and Nieman Fellow at Harvard University, said the real problem is U.S. policies, with the first issue the U.S. pro-Israeli tilt. He said there is a contradiction between the goodness of American values at home and the hypocrisy of policies that promote values abroad that are not American. He said that U.S. administrations talk in a style perceived to be arrogant and dictatorial, no matter how worthwhile the cause. In the Arab-Islamic world, most of the people are very vulnerable economically, politically, environmentally, and demographically and don’t welcome our message. He called for more dialogue, rather than one party dic-

tating to the other. To Khouri, the United States is most successful when Americans act as Americans—interacting in business, education, culture, music, and technology. He advised the United States to listen more carefully to what people are saying; engage them in a real dialogue; be more humble; understand that there are many shared values among our different cultures and address those shared values; and look at the policy criticisms that the United States gets and see which policies can be changed. The single most effective way for the United States to change anti-American sentiments throughout the world is to promote the same values abroad as we promote in this country—practice what we preach.

Karim Raslan, Malaysia-based lawyer and columnist, pointed out that Muslim Malaysia is not a failed state and argued that Islam does not mean backwardness and failure. He said that President Bush addresses the same message to Omaha, Nebraska, as he does to the rest of the world. He has to take responsibility for his language, as do those who write for him. Raslan criticized the American media’s coverage of the Middle East and urged the United States to engage the Islamic conservatives—talk to them and listen. “Talk with; don’t tell.”