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The Stanley Foundation
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Innovative approaches to peace and security from the Stanley Foundation

# Arab Media and US Policy: A Public Diplomacy Reset

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## Recommendations

### Transform the Framework of Global Engagement

- Eschew the polarizing rhetoric and unilateral impulses of the "global war on terror." Reinvest in multilateral institutions and initiatives.
- Address the socioeconomic impact of globalization on Arab societies and perceptions of globalization in Arab public opinion.
- Forget about branding the USA and focus on explaining US policies. Branding requires a consistency that is impossible to achieve in US foreign policy.
- Rely on "pull" media that make content available for broad and deep engagement; abandon "push" media that is akin to propaganda.

### Modify the Structure of US Public Diplomacy

- Create a specialized office to coordinate and supervise public diplomacy efforts, whose head should be a special advisor to the president based in the White House.
- Intensify language training and establish a *structure of incentives*.
- Put career diplomats in charge of US public diplomacy. Engage and involve the private sector, but do not put it in the driver's seat.
- Focus on tactical engagement within a broad strategic vision that emphasizes sustainable long-term gains over short-term desired outcomes.

### Recommendations for Specific Actions

- Shut down Al-Hurra Television.
- Reaffirm US commitment to the Geneva Convention; shut down Guantanamo Bay and launch a campaign taking responsibility for harsh prisoner treatment.
- Triple funding for the Fulbright program to and from Arab-speaking countries in the areas of communication, journalism, and media studies.
- Double overall funding and re-focus public diplomacy toward two-way exchanges and away from one-way advertising.

Policy Analysis Briefs are thought-provoking contributions to the public debate over peace and security issues. The views expressed in this brief are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Stanley Foundation. The author's affiliation is listed for identification purposes only.

## Introduction

During the past decade and especially in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, numerous polls and surveys have underscored that the image of the United States in the Middle East has steadily deteriorated. After the invasion of Iraq, a survey conducted by the Pew Charitable Trusts in 2003 found that "the bottom has fallen out of support for America in most of the Muslim world."[1] A poll by Zogby International commissioned by the Arab American Institute, released in December 2006, found that respondents in five Arab countries had worse opinions of the United States than they had one year earlier, 62% in Saudi Arabia, 72% in Egypt, 57% in Morocco, 76% in Jordan, and 47% in Lebanon, compared respectively to 9%, 4%, 1%, 1%, and 10% of respondents in the same countries who had a better opinion of the United States a year earlier.[2] More recently, a June 2007 report by the Pew Charitable Trusts found that "The US image remains abysmal in most Muslim countries in the Middle East and Asia."[3]

This persistently negative image poses a formidable challenge to the ability of the United States to engage the Arab region, casting a cloud of suspicion over US political, economic, and cultural initiatives. Throughout the Arab world, US policymakers are suspected of ulterior motives and double standards. Especially troubling is the fact that terrorist groups like Al Qaeda have deftly drawn on hostility toward the United States in their propaganda efforts. The question posed about Osama bin Laden's communication skills six weeks after September 11, 2001, by longtime diplomat Richard Holbrooke, still haunts US policymakers: "How can a man in a cave outcommunicate the world's leading communications society?"[4] Answering this question and remedying the situation that it reflects is vital for US interests. Nonetheless, as the Center for Strategic and International Studies Commission on Smart Power recently put it, "[r]ecent US administrations have struggled to get public diplomacy right."[5]

Over the last few years, several studies, commissions, reports, and assessments have attempted to understand the Arab media context, diagnose the US image crisis, and issue recommendations on how to remedy the deteriorating "hearts and minds" situation. These include:

- "Report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Managed Information Dissemination" (2001), by the Office of the Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition, Technology and Logistics.
- "Building America's Public Diplomacy through a Reformed Structure and Additional Resources" (2002), by the US Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy.
- "Strengthening US-Muslim Communications" (2003), by the Center for the Study of the Presidency.
- "How to Reinvigorate US Public Diplomacy" (2003), by the Heritage Foundation.
- "The Youth Factor: The New Demographics of the Middle East and the Implications for US Policy" (2003), by the Brookings Institution.
- "Finding America's Voice: A Strategy for Reinvigorating US Public Diplomacy" (2003), sponsored by the Council on Foreign Relations.
- "Arab Media: Tools for the Governments, Tools for the People" (2005), by the United States Institute of Peace.
- "Open Media and Transitioning Societies in the Middle East: Challenges for US Security Policy" (2006), by the Stanley Foundation.
- "US Public Diplomacy: State Department Efforts to Engage Muslim Audiences Lack Certain Communication Elements and Face Significant Challenges" (GAO-06-535, May 2006), by the Government Accountability Office.
- "US International Broadcasting: Management of Middle East Broadcasting Services Could Be Improved" (GAO, 06-762, August 2006), also by the Government Accountability Office.
- "A Smarter, More Secure America" (2007), by the Center for International and Strategic Studies Commission on Smart Power.

Though most of these reports make useful recommendations, public diplomacy efforts toward the Arab world are hampered by several challenges. These include: a lack of awareness of the history of international broadcasting to the Arab world; a lack of knowledge of the current Arab media and communication environment; an approach that focuses on "branding" the United States and

finding instruments to get to the "hearts and minds" of Arabs; a lack of understanding of what communication can and cannot achieve; and an unwillingness to address the gap between US rhetoric and US action, while ignoring some basic, commonsensical steps that can begin to restore the US standing in the region.

Because it has one of the most complex and dynamic media sectors in the world, the Arabic-speaking region will continue to pose a great challenge to US policy and public diplomacy. However, formulating smarter policies, learning historical lessons, understanding the complex Arab media scene, taking heed of the impact of globalization and Arab experiences of that impact, recognizing the limits of "branding" as a label applied to a nation as globally powerful and visible as the United States, and engaging partners and institutions in a new multilateralism would be excellent steps moving forward. To have a chance of success, these actions should take into account historical factors that shape Arab receptions of US messages.

## Two Historical Lessons

Two historical reasons contribute to an inhospitable ground for US broadcasts. Since before World War II, Arabs have been bombarded by international propaganda broadcasts from other Arab nations, Nazi Germany, France, the United States, Great Britain, and the Soviet Union. At the height of the Cold War, Arabic was second only to English as an international broadcasting language.[6] This long exposure makes listeners and viewers suspicious of foreign government attempts to influence their feelings and opinions. Arab viewers today feel hounded by the media of foreign countries. In addition to the United States' Al-Hurra, there is Iran's Al-Alam, Russia's Russia Today, the UK's BBC Arabic service, Germany's Deutsche Welle's Arabic broadcasts, and the Arabic broadcasts of France 24. As a result, US Arabic broadcasts contend in an intensely competitive field with high levels of attention scarcity.

Learning from history is important, but applying the wrong lessons from history leads to misguided policies. Specifically, applying Cold War-era propaganda standards to the contemporary Middle East is counterproductive. Foreign broadcasts might have been useful when there were no alternatives to unreliable government media sources in the targeted regions. People living behind the Iron Curtain were for the most part thirsty for information. Homemade, dissident *samizdat* distributed from person to person often were the only options to the official line from Moscow. In contrast, Arabs today are awash in information of all kinds, delivered through various media platforms. As a result, Arabs have become increasingly discriminating users of media.

With a plethora of Arab media reflecting a broad ideological spectrum, foreign broadcasts come across as dubious in motivation, redundant in content, and preachy in tone. Furthermore, the Arab world has not witnessed a dramatic systemic change like the collapse of the Soviet Union, which allowed the United States to move robustly into the former sphere of Soviet influence. During the 1990s USAID provided around $175 million in media assistance for Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union. By some accounts, more than 1600 broadcasters and 30,000 journalists benefited and, as a result, a dozen national television services reaching a total of 200 million viewers were established.[7] In contrast, Arab media were spurred less by US aid and more by the Arab world's own mixture of geopolitical tensions, petrodollars, and the advent of technologies like geostationary satellites. The communication environment in the Arab world is vastly more complex and competitive than the post-Soviet media scene.

## The Challenging Arab Media Scene

In the past two decades, the media sector in the Arab world has experienced a regional growth whose speed and scope are unprecedented in the contemporary world. In 1990 Arab states controlled virtually all aspects of media activities occurring within their territories. They owned production and broadcasting facilities, had the final say on what went on the air, and to a large extent could influence what their populations listened to and watched. Nearly without exception, national television systems used terrestrial (non-satellite) broadcasting for purposes of fostering socioeconomic development, enhancing national unity, and regime propaganda.

In contrast, in 2007, there are a few hundred television channels broadcasting to the entire Arab world, most of them privately owned though influenced by governments. These channels span

a wide ideological spectrum and reflect competing political, economic, and religious agendas. They offer viewers news, political and social talk-shows, variety and music shows, drama series, reality TV, American sports and sitcoms, Latin American soap operas, Hollywood movies, and European documentaries.[8] In this rapidly changing environment, government media have lost viewers, prestige, and influence, and struggle to stay relevant by playing catch-up to private media. These drastic regional developments present an extremely competitive communication environment for US public diplomacy in the Arab world.

Understanding the factors that have driven the Arab media explosion is a prerequisite for successful communication with the Arab world. After Arab audiences turned *en masse* to international broadcasters like BBC and CNN for information about Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, the establishment of Arabic language equivalents became a priority for the Saudi ruling class seeking to extend its political and economic influence over the region, a process it started with a media buying spree in the 1980s. As a result, politically connected Saudi businessmen launched various satellite channels from London and Rome. At the same time, the Egyptian government launched the Egyptian Satellite Channel mainly for Egyptian troops stationed in Kuwait for the 1991 Gulf War to counter Iraqi propaganda.

Since then, Arab governments have sought to influence pan-Arab media developments, indirectly in the case of the Saudis, and directly in the case of the Egyptians. The Saudi elite has a near monopoly over most pan-Arab print and broadcast media, and Egyptian state-run or state-directed media only have influence over Egyptians within and outside of Egypt. Jordanian and Syrian government-owned satellite broadcasters routinely rank at the bottom of the ratings, while Jordanian and Syrian viewers turn to privately owned channels based in Beirut, Doha, and Dubai. The success of Al-Jazeera has been at least partly due to the degree of separation from the Qatari government that the channel maintains. (This seems to be changing, as the recent rapprochement between Qatar and Saudi Arabia appears to have restrained Al-Jazeera's coverage of Saudi affairs.) Several complicating factors notwithstanding, the lesson is clear. *Direct government ownership or involvement in broadcasting turns viewers off*, a message that public diplomacy practitioners in Washington ought to hear loud and clear.

The sheer complexity of the Arab media environment must also be taken into account. Though Al-Jazeera is the most recognized and fretted about pan-Arab satellite channel, there are more than 300 satellite channels broadcasting in Arabic to an audience residing between Morocco and Iraq, in addition to worldwide cable distribution for some channels. Among these, there are a dozen influential outlets, including the Qatar-based Al-Jazeera; the Saudi-owned, UAE-based Al-Arabiya and Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC); UAE-based Dubai Television and Abu Dhabi Television; the Lebanese-Saudi owned, Lebanese-based LBC-*Al-Hayat*; and Hezbollah's Lebanese-based Al-Manar. In addition, there are numerous channels specialized in business (CNBC Arabiya, Al-Aqariya and Al-Iqtisadiyya), women's issues (Heya TV), religion (Al-Rissala, Al-Majd, Iqraa'), and music (Rotana, Music Plus, Melody), in addition to state satellite channels. It is important to note that the sector remains in a state of flux, with new players coming on the scene on a monthly basis each month. (In November 2007 the daily *Al-'Arab* was relaunched in Qatar with plans for a pan-Arab readership, and Hariri-owned Future TV is poised to launch a satellite news network from Beirut). However, there are unmistakable signals of a trend toward consolidation, with the merger of LBC's satellite operation and Rotana in the summer of 2007, the fact that several channels have restructured themselves as multi-platform networks, such as the Al-Jazeera Network (Al-Jazeera, Al-Jazeera English, Al-Jazeera Children's Channel, Al-Jazeera Live, Al-Jazeera Sports, Al-Jazeera Documentaries) and the MBC Group (Al-Arabiya, MBC 1, MBC 2, MBC 3, and MBC 4). Not all of these channels are equally successful, but a few regularly attract a mass audience.

What kinds of programs attract Arab viewers in large numbers? There are many factors that can explain audience attraction and retention, but the most popular Arab television programs have been those with the following features: (1) historical or political resonance, (2) narratives of social mobility, (3) and interactive features. If we consider the last three or four years, we see that talk shows, reality television, and drama series with historical or political themes are ratings busters. During Ramadan, the year's most important month for

Arab media industries and the equivalent of the "sweeps" in US television, drama series attract the largest audiences.[9] Two shows dominated the ratings and discussions this year. The first, *King Faruq*, revisits an important period in Egyptian history that led to the rise of Gamal Abdul Nasser. The second, *Bab Al-Hara* (The Neighborhood Gate), is a nostalgic look at social life in a Damascene community, offering a powerful vision of a simpler, more meaningful and locally centered life. A few other hits in recent Ramadan seasons have followed the making of terrorists from Afghanistan camps to the streets of Arab capitals, or explored the attraction of religious ideas for segments of Arab youth. Reality TV shows like *Star Academy* and *Superstar* have also been immensely popular, precisely because they stage competitions whose outcomes are interactively decided by viewers voting for contestants who move from anonymity to stardom within a few months.[10] The dynamism and interaction on pugilistic talk shows also attract viewers, especially when they are able to call in and express their opinions. Historical resonance, social mobility, and the possibility for viewers to interact with programming content (not to mention the revealing wardrobe of alluring program hosts and guests) are key indicators of popularity.

Grasping the complexity of the Arab media environment entails moving beyond asking whether an Arab media outlet is "anti-American" or "pro-American." It is clear even to the casual observer that Al-Arabiya and LBC-Al-Hayat are friendlier to the United States than Al-Jazeera is. Beyond these obvious differences, however, the complexity of the Arab media scene makes binary distinctions (anti/pro) superficial and unhelpful. Though some institutions display biases for or against US policy, many channels present a more ambivalent package. Some Arab media outlets create dilemmas because they advocate some declared US objectives, even if indirectly, while countering others, sometimes directly. Consider the Lebanese satellite television channel New TV. Initially launched as a platform for the Lebanese Communist Party, the channel is currently owned by businessman Tahseen Khayyat but maintains its leftist stance. New TV has led a relentless anticorruption drive in Lebanon, coupled with a staunchly secularist editorial line and a multi-sectarian staff, a rare occurrence in Lebanon's sectarian media landscape. The channel's editorial line is also sharply critical of US policies in the Middle East. New TV is an excellent example of local, relatively independent (the channel's owner reportedly has political and business links in Qatar, Libya, and Tunisia) media that advocates economic and political transparency and a secular outlook that is nonetheless critical of the United States' agenda in the Middle East. To recapitulate, New TV is aligned with two professed US policy goals to (1) promote nonsectarianism and (2) tackle corruption and foster transparency in governance, while also criticizing US policy in the Middle East. It is extremely difficult for US broadcasts to compete with such a channel. Arguably, New TV presents more positives than negatives, since its tough reporting on corruption is unique and its nonsectarianism rare in the pan-Arab media industry, while its criticism of US policy is shared by numerous pan-Arab channels. To appreciate that balance, however, US policymakers will have to put long-term policy goals ahead of immediate foreign policy needs, which is an arduous task in the age of the 24-hour news cycle.

The economic impact of the pan-Arab media scene is difficult to measure in the absence of reliable information about the advertising market. Available data reflect publicly available "rate-card" figures, which are larger than the amounts that are actually paid. However, there is a considerable economic impact in that the media sector employs a growing number of Arab citizens, especially younger men and women. The success of these media institutions has an economic impact beyond their owners. As Dubai emerged as an Arab media capital, it siphoned off mostly young and qualified media workers from throughout the Arabic-speaking world, creating disequilibrium in other media markets. The media's economic impact is sometimes felt locally. For example, when the Lebanese channel MTV, a minor institution by today's Arab television standards, was shut down in 2003 by Lebanese authorities under Syrian pressure, more than 300 families lost their livelihood. Because they are increasingly important employers, Arab media institutions play a growing socioeconomic role. As a result, people feel protective of these socially embedded institutions, and harsh criticism of Arab media from Washington adds to negative opinions of the United States.

Though television remains by far the most influential medium in the Arab world, the pan-Arab media scene is not restricted to television. Mobile phones and other portable devices are now part and parcel of the new Arab media environment.

(Internet penetration rates are still comparatively low, with the exception of the small Gulf States.) In fact, the most successful media institutions in the Arab world integrate multiple media in their production and programming strategies. This is especially the case in entertainment programs, where the use of text-messaging by viewers to nominate, select, vote, or express opinion are now ubiquitous. This media convergence is driven by business considerations. In a region where audience measurements and ratings remain not fully reliable, embedding interactive multimedia features enables a new business model. Every time a viewer votes, nominates, or selects using text-messaging, they pay a fee. This income is rumored to have matched, even surpassed, advertising revenues in some cases.

The impact of media convergence is not only at the economic level. The new Arab communication environment creates social and political opportunities, and security challenges. The connectedness between different media, due to commercially driven technological convergence, creates new ways to communicate and to reach new publics. When average citizens can connect mobile phones and television, traditional communication patterns are transformed as access to the means of communication becomes easier and more widely spread. The resulting situation, one I have called "hypermedia space," enables social and political communication that previously may not have been allowed.[11] It also allows any social group, including terrorist organizations, access to public space through media convergence. A short video of a beheading taken on a mobile phone and then posted on the Internet makes its way to local, pan-Arab, and subsequently global television screens, Internet sites, and newspaper front pages.

Perhaps more importantly, Arab hypermedia space, with its interactivity, stealth, and slick multimedia gimmicks, exposes the gaping hole between the vibrancy of the Arab media sector and the stagnancy of Arab politics. Viewers used to calling in live and venting about their rulers' incompetence on one of Al-Jazeera's shows are all the more frustrated when they hang up and return to a world where their words make no difference whatsoever. The pan-Arab airwaves simply are more pluralistic and free-wheeling than Arab streets and parliaments, and the connection between screen and street has been weak and sporadic—Lebanon's 2005 Independence Intifada, known in Washington as the "Cedar Revolution," one of those moments when television screens and Arab streets were in sync, was short-lived, but its memory makes the current standoff over Lebanon's presidential election all the more bitter. Similarly, the Damascus Spring initiated by the newly minted president Bashar Al-Asad, which was widely covered in the Arab media, quickly sunk into a frigid winter of repression.

When I convened a meeting of distinguished public diplomacy practitioners, journalists, and scholarly experts in Washington, DC, last year, the gap between media dynamism and political stagnation emerged as the most important long-term dimension of the growth of Arab media.[12] The vast expansion of media discourse raises hopes and aspirations that are then dashed by authoritarian politics. This paradox breeds extremism and sets the ground for resentment, instability, and violence.[13]

## A Public Diplomacy Reset

In sharp contrast to the historically resonant, locally relevant and interactive content of the Arab media environment, the US government's Al-Hurra television has offered talking-head newscasts, talk shows, and documentaries, in a below-average graphic package. In all fairness, the US government-funded channel has brought to Arab audiences some interesting and in some cases provocative documentaries and talk shows. Nonetheless, Al-Hurra cannot compete with the vibrant mix of historically resonant, creatively produced, and locally meaningful programming offered by the leading pan-Arab channels. Efforts to reach Arab viewers must take into account the region's news priorities, and avoid costly mistakes like the infamous broadcast of a cooking show at the time when virtually all Arab and Western news channels were covering live the assassination by the Israeli military of Hamas founder Sheikh Yassin. Reaching Arab viewers entails broadcasting content featuring characters that US policymakers consider unsavory or even dangerous. Attacks from Capitol Hill or *The Wall Street Journal* on Voice of America for wanting to air an interview with Taliban leader Mullah Omar, or on the new Al-Hurra management for airing a speech by Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah are counterproductive because they are based on ideology rather than expert knowledge. Leading by example and giving space

to different, even those considered enemy, views contributes to improving the reputation of the United States.

US global communication efforts are also undermined by their close identification in the minds of their receivers with the "global war on terrorism," which has tainted America's relationship with the rest of the world. The unilateralist policies and actions this war has engendered—especially the invasion of Iraq—coupled with the confrontational "you are with us or you are against us" rhetoric, has turned the Middle East, and many other parts of the world, into a minefield for US diplomacy. At the same time, the rhetoric of bringing freedom, democracy, and "civilization" to the Middle East, besides reminding the region's populations of their past experience with European colonialism and imperialism, sets up overly ambitious objectives and exposes the gap between stated objectives and actual policy.

Consider the striking difference between the two visits that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made to Egypt. During the first visit, in June 2005, in a widely covered speech, she tersely instructed: "The Egyptian government must fulfill the promise it made to its people," which included "free elections," an "independent judiciary," and freedom "to assemble, and to participate, and to speak to the media."[14] This was in stark contrast with her second, October 2007, visit when Secretary Rice answered a reporter's question about democratization in Egypt in a subdued tone, saying: "Many positive things are happening. Economically, a lot of things are happening. But we do have concerns about political events here. I raised, for instance, our concerns about the detention of journalists, and we have had a discussion of those issues."[15] This clear example of inconsistency in US policy undercuts public diplomacy.

Similarly, Palestinian elections, which resulted in the victory of Hamas and the recent declaration of a state of emergency by Pakistani strongman and key US ally in the fight against terrorism Pervez Musharraf, are challenging developments that leave the United States open to accusations of double standards. Discrepancies between US past rhetoric and present actions provide opportunities for unsympathetic Arab columnists, talk show hosts, and (to a lesser, but growing extent) bloggers to criticize US policies.

To counter hostile perceptions in the Arab world, the Bush administration has resorted to censorship and counterpropaganda. News that the Pentagon was censoring pictures of the coffins of US service men and women killed in Afghanistan or Iraq, or that White House officials were "coordinating" with US networks on how to cover the war on terrorism, were aired in the US and Arab media, adding to the negative perception that the US government could not be trusted. These impressions were greatly amplified by news stories that US authorities in Iraq were planting stories in Iraqi newspapers that cast US troops in a good light, or "subsidizing" Iraqi journalists to ensure positive coverage.[16]

These actions are problematic not only at the ethical level; they are also public diplomacy blunders. In an Arab world awash in media and information, these news items become part of the story, fueling exactly the currents in public opinion they were intended to weaken. US policymakers would do well to heed the admonition in the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World report "Changing Minds, Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for US Public Diplomacy in the Arab World," which unequivocally stated that US public diplomacy should be about "candor and confidence, not spin and sugar-coating" because "manipulative public relations and propaganda are not the answer." This is because, as the report put it succinctly, "Foreign policy counts."[17]

## The Crux of the Problem: Policies Before Values

Though a small, extremist minority may hate values that Americans share with many other nations and cultures, more Arabs are turned off by US policies in the Middle East. Supporting authoritarian Arab leaders and Israeli policies toward the Palestinians contribute to Arab attitudes toward the United States. Numerous studies have confirmed that US policies and perceptions of these policies, and not a difference of values, are the root cause of the US image problem in the Arab world.

A February-March 2003 survey of Arab public opinion by Telhami found that US policy clearly outweighed respondents' values as a determinant of attitudes toward the United States, in some cases in factors of 2 to 1 (33% and 67% in Saudi

Arabia; 29% and 58% in Lebanon).[18] Similarly, a 2004 six-nation survey probed the relative importance of values and policies in determining Arab attitudes toward the United States. Findings indicated that values were the main determinant for 18% of respondents in Morocco, 10% in Saudi Arabia, 16% in Jordan, 9% in Lebanon, and 9% in the United Arab Emirates. In contrast, US policies were the main determinant for 79% of respondents in Morocco, 86% in Saudi Arabia, 76% in Jordan, 89% in Lebanon, and 75% in the United Arab Emirates.[19] US policy outweighed US values in all six Arab countries surveyed, at 59% vs. 10% in Egypt, 83% vs. 11% in Jordan, 76% vs. 19% in Lebanon, 88% vs. 7% in Morocco, 77% vs. 18% in Saudi Arabia, and 58% vs. 40% in the United Arab Emirates.[20] Clearly, disagreement over policy outweighs differences in values by several orders of magnitude. Like many Europeans, many Arabs "love the idea of America, but they are not always so enamored by the practice."[21]

The tendency of the Bush administration to view US image problems in the Arab world through the prism of values as opposed to policy may stem from the influence of the "clash of civilizations" approach to international relations. In spite of the fact that this approach is not supported by the voluminous data cited above, it has led to an excessive emphasis on religion as an important factor to explain widespread Arab negative opinions of the United States. In fact, Islam is a factor, but not a very significant one, in determining attitudes toward the United States. There is sparse data about this sensitive issue, but polling Lebanese Christians revealed that the favorable-to-unfavorable ratio among them was 24% to 69%, while among Muslims it was 17% to 75%. In terms of US "Policy toward Arabs," the numbers were 4% favorable and 90% unfavorable among Muslims, and 7% to 89% among Christians. Proportions for "Policy toward Palestinians" were 3% and 90% among Muslims, and 5% and 91% among Christians. Religion, the pollster concluded, "appears to play a negligible role in shaping attitudes toward America."[22] While for some Muslims religion may be a basis for their opposition to the United States, Islam should be considered one variable among numerous others, and not the most important, independent variable that determines attitudes toward the United States.

## The Impact of Globalization

US policy assumes that the main reasons for hostility toward the United States are religious, ideological, or political, while in fact economic reasons loom large in negative perceptions of the United States. Policymakers should take into account growing resentment over the widening economic gap between rich and poor in most parts of the world and in the Arab world in particular. As a Congressional Research Service report put it, "… there is a tendency to blame US-led globalization for the region's economic ills."[23]

It is crucial for US policymakers to understand the impact of globalization on people's lives and, perhaps as importantly, how negative perceptions of globalization are intricately linked to US foreign policy in the Middle East. Many Arabs view US-led globalization as a successor of European colonialism and imperialism, which seeks to control their resources and weaken their countries. According to a report on public diplomacy by the United States Government Accountability Office, "US support for globalization, which is viewed as hurting Muslims" (p. 25) is a major root cause of anti-Americanism, alongside "the Arab/Israeli conflict, the war in Iraq, US support for antidemocratic regimes in the region, [and] perceptions of US imperialism."[24] Another report concludes that "US policies are widely viewed as increasing the gap between rich nations and poor nations."[25] US support for oil-wealthy Gulf monarchies also exposes the United States to resentment in less wealthy Arab societies.

Indeed, a Pew worldwide poll of "influential people in politics, media, business, culture and government" conducted a few months after the attacks of September 11, 2001, found that, among "major reasons for disliking the United States," 59% of those polled in the Mideast named the perception that the United States causes a gap between rich and poor, more than those who named US support of Israel, 57%, compared to 54% who cited their resentment of US power as a major reason to dislike the United States.[26] Similarly, a poll conducted by Birzeit University in the West Bank in October 2001 found that 86.5% of those polled agree that "the United States is "[r]ich at the expense of poor nations."[27] The finding that global economic governance is a source for anti-US sentiment for more Arabs than US support for Israel dramatically illustrates the importance of this issue, even if a recent poll

found a more complex situation whereby "[t]he publics of the world broadly embrace key tenets of economic globalization but fear the disruptions and downsides of participating in the global economy."[28]

Globalization is associated with what many Arabs see as US double standards. Indeed, there are perceptions that the United States does not really believe in free-wheeling economic and cultural exchanges and that it uses globalization as a one-way instrument to grab a large share of the world's wealth. The controversy over the Dubai Ports then-impending acquisition of docking operations in US ports, and the strongly negative reactions it triggered among US politicians, even if President Bush was initially supportive of the deal, was heavily covered in the Arab media and resonated significantly with Arabs as an example of US double standards when it comes to globalization (i.e., the impression that it is acceptable for US companies to acquire Arab commercial interests while the reverse is not acceptable to US authorities). The coverage of the botched US government response to Hurricane Katrina and pictures of urban poverty in the world's wealthiest nation added to the impression of a callous superpower that does not care about the weak and the poor.

## The Trouble With "Branding"

US public diplomacy has often been discussed in terms of "branding" the United States. Commenting on the appointment of advertising executive Charlotte Beers as the first Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, then Secretary of State Colin Powell praised Beers by saying that "she got me to buy Uncle Ben's rice."[29] Though the notion of nation-branding enjoys popularity, the branding metaphor is problematic for US public diplomacy for several reasons.

Branding is an often misunderstood and misused label. In this context, US public diplomacy practitioners appear to be addressing the overall image of the United States when they refer to "brand." This oversimplification of national image has backfired in US global communication efforts. A country and the vast array of its policies, especially when it is the sole global superpower, are a great deal more difficult to brand than a consumer item. As journalist Naomi Klein succinctly put it, "America is not a hamburger."[30]

Moving beyond a simplistic notion of branding would enable an understanding of the complexities inherent in promoting the image of a country as powerful and globally visible as the United States. It is difficult to maintain "brand consistency" in promoting the US image overseas, precisely because a brand is a relationship to be nurtured, not an image to be advertised.

Educated Arabs appear to understand, seemingly better than some US policymakers do, that the United States is radically pluralistic. On frequent trips in the Middle East over the last few years, I was surprised how well-known dissident American authors like Michael Moore and Noam Chomsky were—in addition to other US public figures. Seymour Hersh's recent articles about US policy toward Iran and Hezbollah in *The New Yorker* have made him a household name in Arab capitals. Among Arabs who read or know of these authors, even some of the most ardent critics of the Bush administration's policies concede that it is because freedom of speech is upheld in the United States that these authors can write what they write and that they would be jailed or worse if they published similar criticism in the Arab world. Nonetheless, when US words and actions are incompatible, people more readily remember the negative elements.

Especially challenging in regard to brand consistency are the highly visible contradictions inherent in US policy toward the Middle East. US support of democracy wavers when allies lose elections; support of friendly dictators belies words about freedom. The result is a lack of credibility. One survey of Arabs' attitudes toward the United States found 65% of respondents believed that "democracy is not a real US objective," while 5% believed it was an important US objective that will make a difference and 16% believed it was an important objective but that the United States is "doing it the wrong way."[31] Anger at the United States comes from "a clear perception of false advertising,"[32] which stems from the difference between stated US goals and actual US policies and actions. As a Stanley Foundation report on Arab media and the US image in the Middle East put it, "US policies need to align not only with positive regional trends but also with each other."[33]

One solution recommended to help remedy contradictions in US policy is to segment the audience and tackle it one section at a time, offering

multiple "sub-brands" of the United States in several Arab countries. In this approach, advocated among other places in the 2006 GAO report, each Arab country (or groups of them) is offered different "brands" of the United States. It is generally valid to argue that "policymakers need to constantly assess the landscape by region, by country, by audience, and by medium."[34] The problem with audience segmentation in the Arab world is that truly local media are nonexistent. Many governments transmit national television broadcasts via satellite; the Internet (even if for the moment access remains limited) is trans-local, and so are the electronic versions of the newspapers on it. FM radio remains for the time being more local than other media, but its signals do spill over national borders. Low Internet penetration rates mean that this is still not a significant medium for the Arab population at large, but an important link to the Arab elite. Music television, business, and women's channels can be said to be niche media amenable to a segmentation strategy, but they would be awkward platforms for public diplomacy efforts. Because of the lack of local media, segmenting the Arab audience may lead to even greater inconsistency in the US image presented to the region.

## Toward a New Multilateralism

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, US policy has taken a decidedly unilateralist direction, dismissing the United Nations, brushing off concerns expressed by allies, and enshrining an overall "go it alone" tendency in a preemptive strike doctrine communicated through a "you're with us or you're against us" rhetoric. Unilateralism has negatively affected the US image since, according to the Pew Charitable Trusts, "the view that the US acts unilaterally is an opinion that has tracked closely with America's overall image over the past five years."[35]

Conversely, the perception that other leaders act multilaterally enhanced their standing considerably. Consider the reputation of former French president Jacques Chirac. After the invasion of Iraq in 2003, while some Washington politicians were busy changing "French fries" to "Freedom fries," Arabs took notice of Chirac's opposition to the Iraq war and his insistence on referring to the United Nations as an institutional framework for resolving the crisis. When asked about which world leaders they trusted to "do the right thing," Chirac ranked first in three Arab countries—61% of those polled in Jordan named the then French president, as did 81% in Lebanon, and 65% in Morocco—and third among Palestinians, where 32% named him as a leader in whom they have confidence.[36] Similarly, a poll conducted in 2006 by Telhami and Zogby International revealed that Chirac was (at 8%) the second most admired leader outside of the respondents home countries of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. The fact that the first most admired leader was Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah (14%), and that Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (4%) and Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez (3%) ranked third and fourth, respectively, speaks to the depth and scope of the US reputation crisis.[37] France also received consistently top ratings among Arabs for the preferred country to live in, and for the preferred country to be a superpower.

This difference between the United States and France, two Western countries with many similarities, cannot be caused by a disagreement with, let alone a hatred of, US values. Neither can it be simply attributed to the fact that France does spend more per capita on public diplomacy than the United States' annual nearly $ 1.5 billion,[38] though it does suggest that US spending needs to increase. Nor can it be explained by the United States and France's respective treatment of their Muslim population, where France has witnessed protracted problems that the United States has not. (Overall, French Muslims tend to be poorer and less integrated than their US co-religionists.) Rather, positive images of France and its leaders compared to negative images of the United States can be largely explained by France's public insistence on negotiated and multilateral solutions of crises in its *foreign* policy, even when it pursued an aggressive and largely failed *domestic* policy toward its Muslim population. The same pattern is discernable in late 2007 with French diplomatic efforts to defuse the tense political situation in Lebanon and come up with a consensus candidate for the Lebanese presidency, as opposed to US policy, which basically consists of supporting the Siniora government and threatening Hezbollah and Syria. It does not matter whether the French are genuinely committed to multilateralism and diplomacy, or as some suggested in the case of Iraq, were simply mounting a challenge to the United States. What matters is that Arab public opinion sees a wide gap between US and French policy,

action and rhetoric. What matters even more is that these perceptions translate into an image of France that looks all the more positive when compared to the dismal US image, despite France's tough domestic policy on Muslims.

The United States should go back to being a rule maker, not a rule breaker. The CSIS Commission on Smart Power, headed by Joseph Nye Jr. and Richard Armitage, identified "public diplomacy" and "alliances, partnerships, and institutions" as two areas out of five critically important areas, with the objective of rebuilding "the foundation to deal with global challenges."[39] Like others before it, this group recognized that policies that stem from multilateral consultations are credible and legitimate, and that countries find their reputations enhanced when they pursue policies that enjoy credibility and legitimacy. However, "multilateralism cannot be merely a public relations strategy designed to provide political cover for unilateral action."[40] Working with others must become institutionalized in US foreign policy.

A renewed US multilateralism must also go beyond Track I diplomacy and integrate numerous state and nonstate actors. In the Arab world, it would mean promoting exchanges between journalists, creative media workers, and students in these critical areas. Existing programs should be expanded, especially Fulbright fellowships in the area of journalism, communication, and media studies whose numbers should be tripled. To mitigate the impression that this is US indoctrination, the United States should consider partnering with Arab and European professional, academic, and civil society organizations focused on media and communication.

A sensible, engaged, and firm multilateral strategy to pressure Arab governments could be implemented behind the scenes, dedicated to help change media laws, enhance journalistic autonomy, and promote homegrown independent media. The current approach of self-righteous public rhetoric and inconsistent action should be reversed. US officials should make less grandstanding statements in public to the effect that Arab rulers should allow more freedom and apply more discrete diplomatic pressure. These efforts should foster independent localism, where media institutions cease to be foreign policy instruments for Arab states to use against their neighbors, and re-focus on their domestic scenes, from attack dogs to watchdogs.

So as not to be seen as promoting double standards, US policymakers should also stop complaining about the Arab news media's focus on the Arab-Israeli conflict and Iraq. These are important to Arabs, so they are important to Arab media. In news coverage, localism and pan-Arab regionalism can occur simultaneously. The existence of relatively independent media has added benefits. It exposes corruption, contributes to more transparent economies, and fosters higher educational and health standards.[41]

In addition to fostering this independent localism in the news media, a series of basic, commonsensical steps should be undertaken by the US government. First, create an empowered and more autonomous public diplomacy organism and give its head an office in the White House as special advisor to the president, which would give him/her more power than currently enjoyed by the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy. Second, increase public diplomacy funding, expand Arab language training, and set up a structure of incentives to learn Arabic; for example, shortening rotations in the Middle East, which are currently among the longest for US diplomats. Third, provide Arab journalists with wider and easier access to US sources; facilitate visa and airport entry procedures, especially for students and journalists; and make sure US consular staff are adequately trained in human relations.

Finally, consider bold and imaginative initiatives. For example, establish a Global Endowment for Creativity (GEC) with other donor nations. This would be in the best spirit of the new multilateralism, bringing together public servants, artists, intellectuals, and community and business leaders. Like the national endowments for the arts and for the humanities, the new body, funded and managed jointly with international partners, including Japan, the European Union, and perhaps even China, should award grants and fellowships to artists, intellectuals, directors, producers, and journalists from the Middle East. Furthermore, GEC should sponsor annual literary and media competitions, whose winners will be granted wide distribution or publication. Even if some participating or winning projects turn out to be critical of US policy, they should not be excluded. The gain in US reputation from including them would probably outweigh the effects of criticism. It would show a congruence of values

and actions that would be a formidable charm offensive and could have a deeply and widely transformative impact because it demonstrates that freedom of speech and respect for opposing opinions are actually practiced values, not instrumental rhetoric.

## Conclusion

The poor reputation of the United States in the Arab world is not a communication problem that can be solved with communication processes; it is a substantive policy issue that must be solved by smart policies whose rationales and objectives must be skillfully communicated. As the prominent Arab journalist Rami Khoury wrote, "People in Washington who think" that Arab perceptions of the United States can be fixed through better communication channels "are offering counterproductive projects, reflecting inappropriate policies, based on inaccurate analyses, stemming from faulty diagnoses."[42]

Communication is like mortar holding the bricks of an edifice together; just as we cannot substitute mortar for bricks, we cannot substitute communication for credible, legitimate policies. Following this recognition, one of the first foreign policy actions of the incoming administration should be to shut down Al-Hurra television, and offer qualified members of its staff other jobs in public diplomacy.

In the same vein, the search for new technologies and new channels to influence Arabs is counterproductive in the absence of a strategic understanding of the importance of credibility and legitimacy. There are also technical and social limitations. E-Diplomacy sounds great, but in key Arab countries Internet penetration hovers around 1%, and will not be substantially affected by providing Internet access at American Corners. Using personal, interactive devices like mobile phones can also backfire. The effective use of such technologies is based on interpersonal intimacy and social trust, and governments have abysmal levels of both. As a matter of strategy, US public diplomacy should avoid propaganda-like "push" media like Al-Hurra, and focus on "pull" media—those media that listeners, viewers, and users can themselves pull off library shelves, points of sale, and as connectivity increases in the future, the Internet.

It is important for US public diplomats to keep in mind that the US image problem in the Arab world for the most part is neither the message nor the medium. The problem resides in actions and policies. The silver lining in all of this is that negative perceptions of the United States in the Arab world are neither old nor immutable. They are the result of US policies[43] and, as a result, they can be turned around. The first step to effect the needed transformation is to abandon the "global war on terror" as the US government's main framework for global engagement. This means ending the use of both preemptive action and confrontational rhetoric; integrating social and economic concerns in foreign policy and public diplomacy; and refocusing the full power, influence, and resources of the United States to broker a sustainable, comprehensive peace in the Middle East, an achievement that 62% of Arab respondents to a study said would improve their view of the United States—the most of several possible US actions.[44] Efforts should focus on comprehending the Arab world as a differentiated area with multiple identities and concerns, without losing sight of the major, pan-Arab issues. In this endeavor, the most difficult, and most important challenge, is to balance long-term strategic objectives with short-term desired outcomes.

## Endnotes


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