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We Must Address Poor Image of United States in the Arab World

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Abstract

One of the most daunting tasks facing the next U.S. president will be restoration of America's reputation in the world. Nowhere is this imperative so difficult and yet so vital than in the Arab world.

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We must address poor image of United States in the Arab world

Marwan M. Kraidy

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One of the most daunting tasks facing the next U.S. president will be restoration of America's reputation in the world. Nowhere is this imperative so difficult and yet so vital than in the Arab world.

Since Sept. 11, the U.S. image has steadily deteriorated among Arabs. A recent poll by the Pew Charitable Trusts found that it "remains abysmal ... in the Middle East."

According to the poll, the view that the United States acts unilaterally is an opinion that has tracked closely with the decline in America's overall image over the past five years. Conversely, the perception that other leaders act multilaterally enhanced their standing considerably. Former French president Jacques Chirac has an excellent reputation in several Arab countries compared to the negative perceptions of President Bush. This difference is explained by France's insistence on multilateral solutions to foreign-policy crises even while France pursued an aggressive and largely failed domestic policy toward its Muslim population.

To counter hostile perceptions in the Arab world, the present U.S. administration has resorted to censorship at home and counterpropaganda in the Middle East, such as censoring pictures of the coffins of U.S. soldiers, "coordinating" with U.S. networks on how to cover the war on terror and planting stories in Iraqi newspapers.

In an Arab world awash with media, such actions fuel exactly the currents in public opinion they were intended to weaken. The Arab media field is intensely competitive, experiencing explosive growth since 1990. Though Al-Jazeera is the best known, there are more than 300 privately owned satellite channels.

In contrast to life behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War, Arabs today are awash with information of all kinds, delivered through various media platforms and covering a broad ideological spectrum. Many Arabs increasingly find foreign broadcasts dubious in motivation, redundant in content and preachy in tone.

Grasping the complexity of the Arab media environment entails moving beyond asking whether an Arab media outlet is "anti-American" or "pro-American." Many channels present a more ambivalent package, advocating some declared U.S. objectives such as transparency in governance, while opposing U.S. Middle East policies. To deal with this ambivalence, U.S. policymakers will have to put long-term policy goals ahead of immediate foreign-policy needs, a difficult task in a 24-hour news cycle.

So what should the United States do to rebuild its reputation? Working with others must become institutionalized in U.S. foreign policy. The United States should go back to being a deal maker, not a rule breaker. Multilaterally vetted policies are credible and legitimate. They enhance national reputations.

A renewed U.S. multilateralism must integrate numerous state and non-state actors. A series of basic, common-sense steps should be undertaken: Create an empowered, better-funded and more autonomous public diplomacy organism. Expand Arab language training and set up a structure of incentives to learn Arabic. Provide Arab journalists with wider and easier access to U.S. sources. Facilitate visa and airport-entry procedures. Make sure U.S. consular staff is adequately trained in human relations. Most important, emphasize two-way exchanges and decrease one-way advertising.

Finally, the United States should undertake a bold and imaginative initiative such as establishing a Global Endowment for Creativity. The endowment would be funded and managed jointly with international partners - Japan, the European Union, perhaps China - to bring together public servants and civil society. Like the national endowments for the arts and for the humanities, this new body should award grants and fellowships to Arab artists, intellectuals and journalists. It should sponsor annual literary and media competitions; winning work would be granted wide distribution or publication.

The low U.S. reputation in the Arab world is not a communication problem but a policy problem. Communication, like mortar, holds together the bricks of an edifice. Just as we cannot substitute mortar for bricks, we cannot substitute communication for smart policies.

The silver lining is that negative perceptions of the United States in the Arab world are not old or immutable. They are the result of U.S. policies. So a change in policies can also result in a change in perceptions.

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