

Relating to the Muslim world: maybe less is more?

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Twenty two years ago, Ramadan fell in the middle of summer and I was residing in Rabat, Morocco, doing research on regional relations and enjoying the opportunity to live in a Muslim country of great charm and beauty. I had no formal link to the US Embassy, but as a courtesy to me as a Library of Congress employee, I was allowed some office space at the US Cultural Office, part of what was then called the US Information Agency and is now integrated into the Department of State. The USIA office was in a modest downtown office building and was close to the cultural office of the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics. To this day, I remember that USIA virtually shut down its programming during Ramadan, while the Soviets held a daily film program, allowing young people to spend an hour in a cool dark place, off the shimmering sidewalks. The films were not memorable, but as I sat in the USSR cultural center, I wondered whether the access provided to these regular folk, decidedly not denizens of the Embassy cocktail circuit, would make a lasting impression on their political views.

Perhaps not, but it stimulated me to reflect on whether our own ideas of outreach are too elitist, and whether our tradition of respecting others' religion actually cuts us off from benign interactions with people of different faiths. In the years after my visit, the cultural office moved out to the affluent suburbs for security reasons, and even fewer Moroccans have access to films, libraries or cultural activities sponsored by the Embassy. Today, we

hear of US reluctance to be visibly associated with secular or missionary schools in the Muslim world, out of fear of offending local sensibilities, and many American non-government organizations and embassies struggle to interact in a normal way with “moderate” Islamists without running afoul of all the new anti-terrorism rules and regulations. The Secretary of State hosts very sophisticated *iftar* receptions with Muslim Ambassadors, and the US President has learned to send end of Ramadan greetings to Muslim Americans and to Muslim leaders around the world. There is much good will and good intentions on the US part to do the right thing by Muslim friends and partners, but clearly a lot of confusion and fumbling too.

How do we get it right? Is it possible to be fair and open and honest and have our message understood as transmitted? Or are our efforts to communicate officially with Muslim societies doomed to fail because of our own cultural norms and because of the agitated state of mind that many if not most Muslims have toward the United States these days? I believe we’ve got serious problems on both the sending side and the receiving side, and need to reflect carefully on how much, if any, of the critical society-to-society communication can be managed by government.

In the information age, it is increasingly difficult to keep different kinds of messages in distinctly separate channels. Governments have many information-related policies and strategies: there is information generated by the bureaucracy for internal deliberations on policy, there is information prepared to convince allies or to bully adversaries in the official exchanges of diplomacy and intelligence, there is occasionally information

deliberately altered to influence a foreign population (psychological operations or propaganda), and then there's the regular press function, with information prepared to inform the American public and the American media about the policies and activities of the government. I believe that the information revolution has made it virtually impossible to keep these channels separate: information moves too fast, there is much greater transparency in government operations than there used to be, and a message designed for a particular audience is now instantly available to a global audience. It is no longer possible to fine-tune a message for a distant Muslim audience and not have your political rivals at home know about it; it is equally hard to share with the American public a policy's nuances without having it dissected in salons in Cairo and Karachi.

Public diplomacy, therefore, is an anachronism in today's world, and is probably doing more harm than good. The transparency that is required in our own society clashes directly with the notion of manipulating perceptions and opinions: for manipulation to occur, you have to appear to be doing something sincere and straightforward. But in today's world, we talk about why and how our government functions in real time, and one cannot publicly acknowledge that we are "spinning" our stories without it having an effect on the target of the spinning. Would it not make more sense to expand the press and information capacity, to work in a more direct and honest way in talking about our policies, and, yes, their shortcomings? Could our press spokesmen not take on a bit of additional work, giving more background and explanation of our policies, not the highly condensed soundbites that they are expected to provide? Could they not be staffed by

people who can retrieve on request additional data or background on our policies and their impact?

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

Public diplomacy towards the Muslim world also contains many more pitfalls. Muslims in general and Arabs in particular can distinguish between American consumer goods that they like and American official policies that they loathe. But we act as if we're surprised that consumers of our goods don't like us after all. We have also conflated the pro-Americanism that may exist, often very superficially, in the Muslim world with support for other aspects of American culture and power. We need to understand the complex attitudes towards us in a more nuanced way, and not try to label people in the region. It is an insult to them, and to our own political culture, which professes to have high tolerance for political disagreement. There are at least three specific ways in which our efforts to communicate with Muslim audiences from official platforms have missed the mark: with respect to economics, the pace of change, and the role of religion in public life.

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

Of course there are many capitalists in Muslim societies who have thrived due to their entrepreneurial skills and their business acumen. They are important members of the political and social elite in Egypt, in Syria, in North Africa, in Pakistan. Sometimes businessmen become advocates for economic reforms because they are more attuned to the need to adapt to new European Union policies, for example, or they see opportunities in seeking free trade agreements with the United States. But when we think about the broader malaise in the Muslim Middle East, we are often talking about the part of the population that has not benefited from the profits of the private sector, and the linkages between our capitalist system and Arab economic elites would not foster greater sympathy or support for US policies from the ranks of the unemployed.

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

Second, we also miss each others' signals when it comes to matters of timing. Americans are impatient and want to measure attitudes of the moment. Our public diplomacy bureaucrats want to know how people are reacting to our "message" so that they can fine-tune it for the next poll, or even the next day's news cycle. But attitudes in non-democratic societies, where most Muslims live, are not easily changed. Cynicism from living with hypocritical rulers does not easily dissipate, as we are seeing in post-Saddam Iraq. The would-be democrats of the Muslim world have acquired some deeply ingrained beliefs about how the world works, and these beliefs cannot be shaken quickly with a few advertisements or articles. We must reconcile ourselves to the fact that attitudes and behavior do not change quickly, and that our efforts to manipulate or change deeply ingrained beliefs and experiences are often feckless, and if done in culturally inappropriate ways, can do more harm than good, and can feed the region's proclivity to

conspiracy theories. In our saturated information market, there is enormous pressure to have “news” to report on change in Iraq, for example, that actually misinform world publics about how change actually does occur.

A third sensitive area is how we communicate about religion in public, or the ties between religion and state. Clearly, across the Muslim world, theologians and independent thinkers are in a fierce and important debate on the issue. There’s a wide range of issues and opinions: should clergy be employees of the state? Have Iran’s clerics been given too much authority in matters of state? How should new constitutions address religion in societies where not all citizens are Muslim?

The United States, again, cannot claim to have the answers. Americans are raised with a myth about the separation of church and state, but our behavior suggests considerable confusion on the point. We have had Presidents, including the incumbent, who are deeply religious and speak of their beliefs in ways that can alienate or offend citizens who hold different beliefs or do not believe the President should see his official duties as having any religious content whatsoever. The Secretary of State invites Muslim diplomats to the formal diplomatic rooms at the Department of State to celebrate the breaking of the fast on Ramadan; at first glance, many are pleased, even touched, at this gesture of cultural goodwill to the world’s Muslims, but shouldn’t we also see it as a bit strange, even patronizing? Would it not be simpler and truer to our own values to be consistent with respect to religion as a private matter? All the state needs to do is create

and preserve an environment where there is freedom of religion and tolerance for all.

Wouldn't that be the most appropriate US message for the Muslim world?

I am not suggesting that engaging with Muslim societies is too hard, or should not be a goal of US policy. I am suggesting that "public diplomacy" is not the way to do it. If one considers the current structure of the State Department, there is an Undersecretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs with three bureaus reporting to that senior official (the Charlotte Beers position, still vacant). The three bureaus that report to the Undersecretary run important and useful programs that permit interaction with diverse groups in Muslim societies. There are cultural and educational programs, media exchanges and training opportunities, etc. I would reallocate the funding to maximize impact on the long-haul issues, education in particular, and phase out the more questionable public diplomacy activities that have generated controversy with no discernible positive benefit to the United States. Our press activities should be expanded, and help to new foreign media in establishing professional standards would be a worthy contribution as countries even in the more closed parts of the Muslim world make the transition from government monopolies on news and information to the wilder world of open information.

If we are open to changing our ways of engaging with the Muslim world in the hopes of avoiding further estrangement, we need to grapple with the elitism of our policies. Our programs more often than not are looking for winners, trying to scout out future leaders in whom to invest. This is true across a range of activities overseas that the US

government supports, with the notable exception of anti-poverty programs or humanitarian relief activities. In diplomatic, educational, and military exchanges, we aim high. We are looking to invest in success, in individuals who may well emerge as a next generation of leaders and decision-makers. Given the widening gap between haves and have-nots in Muslim societies, do we need to reconsider this? Should we not try to reach out to the populations who are vulnerable to hatred and despair and violence? Might a different kind of US engagement help prevent the spread of suicide bombers? Former US peace negotiators have expressed regret for neglecting civil society in Israel and Palestine, the non-official populations that have to minimally accept their governments' policies for them to succeed, even in non-democratic places. One former negotiator now heads Seeds for Peace, the innovative program that brings teenagers from key conflict zones (Arab-Israel, India-Pakistan) to the United States to communicate and even form bonds of friendship. It is worth considering whether a restructuring of programming priorities from elites to a mix that includes more popular audiences, and to young people in particular, might not be the strategic investment that this particular historic juncture calls for.

These modest ideas remain at a level of generality, and cannot adequately address the deep divide that exists between the west and segments of Muslim society in a large group of countries. The generalizations also can cause harm, by failing to recognize the enormous diversity of both American and Muslim societies. In the end, it is up to individuals to build the bridges and to find ways to communicate. In an increasingly interdependent world, more business partnerships, marriages, and friendships can be

formed, and we should encourage and celebrate those ties. But governments matter and represent, for good or ill, the idea of a nation, the aspirations of a culture and its people. Our government has labored hard, and many individuals do so with great sensitivity and skill, but we need to look hard at our policies and our style of communicating with the Muslim world. Perhaps it's time for our government to simplify and reduce the number of information initiatives it has towards the Muslim world, spend more time making sure its policies are wise and grounded in fairness and principle, and then the communication piece will follow naturally.