

# Obama, U.S. Public Diplomacy and the Islamic World

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When Barack Obama became the new U.S. president, one of the primary concerns for many observers was restoring America's image in the eyes of the world. During the eight years of the Bush administration, the favorability ratings of the United States had declined dramatically. Nowhere was the U.S. image more negatively viewed than among publics in Muslim-majority countries. Anti-Americanism had intensified in the Arab world, and spread from Nigeria in West Africa to Indonesia in the Far East. Despite the administration's vigorous efforts to win Muslim hearts and minds through innovative public diplomacy, when former president Bush left office, U.S. favorability ratings were at all-time lows.

Although the Obama administration is only just out of the political starting gate, observers are already noting a distinct change in the prominence and tone of U.S. public diplomacy, specifically with respect to the Muslim world. Some suggest President Obama by his very person and style represents a game changer for U.S. public diplomacy in the Islamic world. He is the son of a Muslim father from Kenya, carries the distinctly Muslim middle name of Hussein and attended school in Indonesia, the most populous Islamic country. In his inaugural address, he spoke directly to the Muslim world, raising the promise of "mutual interests and mutual respect."

During his first week in office, he made a point of granting his first television interview in the White House with an Arab satellite channel and appointed two special envoys -- one to handle the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and another for the Afghanistan and Pakistan area. His new secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, included Indonesia on her first international trip. Shortly after her return from Asia, she headed back out to the Middle East and the politics of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

All of it appears refreshingly dynamic, but is the Obama administration's public diplomacy really a game changer? Or is it a matter of new players with different styles playing the same game? If it is just more of the same, what would a real game changer for U.S. public diplomacy in the Islamic world actually look like?

## **Lessons from the Old Game: Public Diplomacy under the Bush Administration**

Since 9/11, U.S. public diplomacy has experienced a steep learning curve. With smoke still rising from the fallen Twin Towers in Manhattan, U.S. officials struggled to grasp quite literally what hit them as well as how to respond. The realization that foreign perceptions had domestic consequence quickly made public diplomacy a national security issue. When the U.S. launched the war on terror, public diplomacy was second only to the military offensive, and was the lead instrument in the battle for hearts and minds. As Lee Hamilton, co-chair of the influential 9/11 Commission described it, public diplomacy is "how we stop them from coming here to kill us."

Against this emotional backdrop, getting America's message out became Washington's goal, while the Arab and Islamic world became Washington's primary target audience. Not only were the hijackers from this area, but it was also where many believed the U.S. image was most distorted. The two-prong goal of U.S. public diplomacy entailed promoting U.S. values of hope and freedom, while marginalizing and isolating the extremist message of hate and fear. From the U.S. perspective, the battle lines were clearly drawn. Publics in the region seemed less sure, as they repeatedly voiced concerns that the war on terrorism appeared to be a war of civilizations pitting the West against Islam.

In rapid order, the Bush administration rolled out some of the most innovative public diplomacy initiatives in U.S. history. The first under secretary of state for public diplomacy, Charlotte Beers, held out the promise of branding and selling America to the Islamic world through the first-ever international advertising campaign. The \$12 million campaign incorporated radio, television and print advertising with Internet publications, lecture tours and other outreach programs. *Hi Magazine* (2003), a glossy lifestyle magazine with accompanying web site, sought to promote a dialogue with Arab youth. *Radio Sawa* (2002) eschewed the traditional news focus of *Voice of America* and sought to attract Arab youth through a mix of Arab and American pop music. In 2004, the U.S. launched an Arabic-language, satellite television station -- *Al-Hurra* (the Free One) -- to go head-to-head against the popular *Al-Jazeera* and *Al-Arabiya*.

In 2005, observers expected a fresh start when Karen Hughes, Bush's long-time communications adviser took the helm of U.S. public diplomacy. Hughes immediately embarked on a "listening tour" to demonstrate the U.S. desire to reach out to people in the Arab and Islamic worlds. During the trip, Hughes was described as painfully clueless about the cultures of the people and U.S. policies in the region. The tour was widely viewed as a disaster. Hughes' other initiatives also pushed the boundaries of traditional public diplomacy, and included "forward deploying SWAT teams" to counter misinformation, establishing regional media hubs, and building new public-private partnership initiatives and exchange programs. Under her helm, she spearheaded the first U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication. After Hughes' unexpected departure, James Glassman took over. Glassman's push to integrate

social media tools such as YouTube video contests, vlogging and Twitter helped usher in U.S. public diplomacy 2.0.

Despite the impressive array of creative initiatives, U.S. public diplomacy under the Bush administration failed to crack the code for how to effectively communicate with the Arab and Islamic worlds. The lifespan of some of the more innovative initiatives were unexpectedly short as the target audience ignored or angrily dismissed them. Viewed together, the initiatives suffered on several accounts. Their distinct features and failings together offered a legacy of public diplomacy lessons to the Obama administration.

First, U.S. public diplomacy was very much about fighting an information battle rather than communicating with other people. Given the mandate to "get the U.S. message out," U.S. public diplomacy was essentially a one-way, message-driven information assault on the Arab and Islamic world. The public were passive pawns in a war of ideas, as U.S. public diplomacy sought to "out-communicate" the opponent. Domestic critics claimed that U.S. public diplomacy's aggressive approach was counterproductive. As early as 2003, observers broached the idea of "listening" as a way to stem perceptions of U.S. arrogance and indifference to the concerns of the international community. Although Hughes' listening tour failed, listening remained a high-priority tactic.

Second, U.S. public diplomacy appeared to have little understanding or appreciation for the intended audiences. The Muslim world, along with Islam, was viewed as a broad, monolithic mass, unfamiliar and undefined. By using religion as the lowest common denominator to identify its target audience, U.S. public diplomacy inadvertently united 1.3 billion people, who happened to be of a particular faith, in a shared fate and renewed sense of identity. Similarly, and equally ironically, U.S. public diplomacy's drive to promote American culture and values may have inadvertently fueled an awakening across the Islamic world to protect and promote their own cultures and values. The "brass-band" approach of the initiatives -- which relied heavily on arm's length, mass-media tools and self-promotional strategies -- alienated the very same publics that U.S. public diplomacy was seeking to woo. Feeling neither understood nor respected, the audience repeatedly described the initiatives as "patronizing," "condescending," or "insulting."

Finally, U.S. credibility suffered from the disconnect between U.S. public diplomacy and U.S. foreign policy. U.S. public diplomacy initiatives were surprisingly apolitical. Public opinion polls repeatedly showed that discontent with U.S. policies, such as the war in Iraq and the ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, was the principal impetus behind the negative U.S. image. The Bush administration, however, appeared to take pains to sever policy discussions from the discourse on U.S. public diplomacy. For the policymakers in Washington, the problem was not U.S. foreign policy, but rather how it was presented. The result was an ever growing array of creative initiatives using new technologies and strategies, coupled with the ever growing suspicion by the public that U.S. public diplomacy was little more than a hoax, as a prominent Arab journalist called it.

## New Players, New Style

At first glance, the Obama administration's approach to public diplomacy reflects the cumulative lessons learned over the last seven-and-a-half years about how to communicate -- or not communicate -- with the Arab and Islamic world. Most notable is the energy and sense of purpose in the way the administration appears to be reaching out to the international community in general and the Muslim world in particular. The focus on listening and engagement is pronounced as is the deliberate effort to communicate respect and understanding. The rhetoric is less shrill, less demanding and less confrontational. Metaphorically, the image of U.S. public diplomacy is one of open hands rather than clenched fists.

The new style echoes the White Oak recommendations on public diplomacy, which were the result of a January 2009 gathering of experts at a plantation in Florida. Rather than offering any new grand pronouncements, the [White Oak document](#) (.pdf) captures the latest consensus on the shape and direction of U.S. public diplomacy.[1] For example, it articulated a "holistic" vision that expands U.S. public diplomacy discourse beyond its narrow focus on Muslim publics, security and terrorism, in order to engage with other publics across a variety of issues. Similarly, it reiterated the need for U.S. public diplomacy to coordinate its internal structure, improve personnel, expand exchange programs, and increase funding. A more coordinated internal structure was seen as the key to enhancing external credibility. The document also highlighted the balance between the expediency of new information technologies and the need for old-fashioned human contact and relationships. Finally, the recommendations recognized the role of average citizens (citizen diplomacy) in U.S. public diplomacy, as well as Congress and the president.

Perhaps most interesting in the recommendations is the proffered definition of public diplomacy, which expands upon the traditional State Department definition to suggest a role for public diplomacy considerations in foreign policy formulation.

"Public diplomacy is not just a 'war of ideas' but a multipronged effort to understand, inform, engage and influence the attitudes and behavior of foreign opinion leaders and publics, in ways that both promote better foreign understanding of American values, policies and goals, and better inform the U.S. policymaking process."

One also sees in the White Oak document a conceptual shift from public diplomacy as "soft power" to public diplomacy as "smart power." Joseph S. Nye, originator of the term soft power, was one of the participants sitting around the table at White Oak. Public diplomacy as soft power carries with it a rather limiting connotation of communication, persuasion, or influence and is presented as oppositional to military, political and economic hard power tools. Smart power is the combined strategic use of soft and hard power. Alliance building to gain the cooperative advantage is a key element of smart power. John Brown, author of a daily public diplomacy press review, has [suggested](#) that the new administration may be leaning toward a more muscular smart power approach to foreign policy at the expense of making public diplomacy a high priority.

While White Oak recommendations may be indicative of the long-term direction of U.S. policy in dealing with the international publics, the administration's immediate focus on the Muslim world very closely parallels the recommendation of another high-level -- but perhaps less publicized -- recent report titled "[Changing Course: A New Direction for U.S. Relations with the Muslim World.](#)" (.pdf) The report was prepared by a bipartisan, interfaith Leadership Group of 34 American leaders, including 11 Muslim Americans, concerned about the deteriorating relations between the U.S. and the Muslim world.

It highlighted four broad areas as part of a strategy for improving U.S.-Muslim relations, including using diplomacy to engage allies and adversaries in dialogue to resolve key conflicts, supporting efforts to improve governance and promote civic participation in Muslim countries, helping to catalyze job-creating growth in Muslim countries, and improving mutual respect and understanding between Americans and Muslims around the world. This last area of improving understanding focuses specifically on public diplomacy to "reinforce changes in policies and actions." In addition to public diplomacy, the report suggests expanding exchange programs, promoting cultural diplomacy, enhancing news coverage of U.S.-Muslim relations, and involving the Muslim American community as a bridge to the Muslim world. Significantly, the report says the strategy will only be successful if there is a reciprocal effort on by Muslim leaders and publics.

***Next page: The new administration's playbook . . .***

The strategy proposed by "Changing Course" is more comprehensive than other reports. It recognizes the importance of addressing political and economic factors within the Muslim world that impinge upon U.S. relations as well as the wisdom of combining traditional diplomacy with public diplomacy. Noteworthy, the report's recommended options for improving relations are not only based on research and interviews with experts (standard fare for most, if not all, of the high-level reports), but also on polling data and citizen deliberations that were used to explore and test the viability of those recommendations. This is not standard fare and raises the level of confidence in the report's recommendation.

When it was initially published in September 2008, "Changing Course" issued a call for action for the next U.S. president. Thus far, those recommendations could serve as the playbook for following the new administration's activities in the Muslim world. In a preface for a second reprinting of the report in February 2009, the authors note a striking consistency between their recommendations and the new administration's actions so far and its stated intentions.

Among immediate steps to be taken, the report advocated for the incoming president to use the international spotlight of his inaugural address to directly signal the U.S. intention for improving relations with the Muslim world. Obama included in his inaugural speech the line, "To the Muslim world, we seek a new way forward, based on mutual interest and mutual respect." The report also recommended immediate action to re-affirm the U.S. commitment to prohibit all forms of torture." On Obama's second day in office, he signed

executive orders relating to torture, and to closing secret CIA detention centers and Guantanamo Bay.

Also that day, Obama paid a visit to the State Department where he joined Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to announce the appointment of George Mitchell as special envoy for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and Richard Holbrooke as envoy for Pakistan and Afghanistan. Again, these appointments comport with the report's call for greater emphasis on diplomacy to address critical concerns, specifically, the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, engagement with Iran, and Afghanistan-Pakistan. The report even mentioned Mitchell by name as the type of special envoy needed for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Beyond the recommendations outlined by "Changing Course," the Obama administration is crafting its own agenda for improving U.S. relations with the Muslim world. Obama's decision to grant his first interview to an Arab station signals the importance he attaches to communicating with this public. The travel itinerary of Secretary Clinton, including a visit to an Islamic country in her maiden trip and the heart of the Middle East conflict for her second one, similarly signals the importance the administration is attaching to diplomacy in the region. A final dramatic sign, already publicly announced by Obama, is his intention to mark his first 100 days in office by delivering a major speech on U.S. Muslim relations from a capital in the Muslim world.

To complement these new initiatives is a new style and tone, most notably an emphasis on listening. In his interview with Al-Arabiya, he repeated the word "listening" numerous times, as well as "respect" and "respectful." Secretary of State Clinton's overseas visit was also billed as a "listening tour." Listening marks a historic change in U.S. public diplomacy, which has traditionally been more concerned with "telling our story."

The words and actions of the Obama administration do appear to usher in a new approach to U.S. public diplomacy in the Islamic world. However, the most daunting hurdle for U.S. public diplomacy is not developing innovative ways to reach out to the Muslim world, but rather, reconciling inconsistencies between U.S. foreign policy and U.S. public diplomacy. Inconsistencies between U.S. public diplomacy's words and actions and U.S. foreign policy can undermine U.S. credibility. Already there are signs that the Obama administration is tripping over the policy hurdle on several fronts, most notably the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Much has been made of President Obama's interview with Al-Arabiya. According to the veteran public diplomacy blogger and specialist on the Arab media, Marc Lynch, Obama's interview was widely heralded as "positive." However, as one observer in Cairo noted, the interview was widely ignored in Egypt, and deliberately so by some in that Arab capital. Several Web sites that attempted to gather Muslim reaction to President Obama's interview were oddly void of comment.

On the surface, the interview represents a radical change in style from the Bush administration. On another level, however, the interview is eerily similar to the type of innovative, breakthrough thinking in U.S. public diplomacy that the Bush administration

tried in its vigorous efforts to "reach out and communicate with the Muslim world." Much to the chagrin of the planners, well-intentioned initiatives failed to generate the same positive resonance in Cairo as they did in Washington. What was missing was an understanding of how deeply U.S. policy permeates perceptions of U.S. public diplomacy. The initiatives were short-lived because they did not address U.S. foreign policy.

For example, to understand the lack of reaction to the interview, one only has to do some math: compare the 17-minute interview on Al-Arabiya to 22 days of intensive and often graphic coverage of the military assault on Gaza Arab television networks. For many in the region, Obama's rush to reach out to the Muslim world was little conciliation for his studious silence during the Gaza conflict.

In the Al-Arabiya interview, President Obama spoke eloquently about a Palestinian state. Observers both inside and outside of Gaza were quick to note the irony. At the same time Obama was making lofty pronouncements about seeking statehood for the Palestinian people, the U.S. was unable or unwilling to secure the immediate needs of the Palestinian people by helping to open the borders of Gaza to humanitarian assistance and supplies. As Time magazine reported, during a visit to Gaza Sen. John Kerry (D-Mass.) intervened to allow a shipment of pasta that had been blocked by the Israelis.

Many in the region also wonder about the prospects for the new special envoy, George Mitchell. The announcement of his appointment was as high-profile as his mandate is daunting: to reinvigorate peace talks leading to the creation of a Palestinian state. However, the new Israeli Prime Minister-designate Binyamin Netanyahu has ruled out a Palestinian state and instead wants to limit talks to improving the state of the Palestinian economy. As for the Palestinian side, U.S. policy continues to prop up a weak Palestinian leadership in the West Bank and refuses to talk to the leadership in Gaza, which is not only strong, but which also won the 2006 parliamentary elections.

Secretary Clinton's first visit to the region in early March to attend a high-level donor conference for the Palestinians provided a close-up view of how similar the Obama administration's line is to that of the Bush administration. In addition to remaining U.S. policy restrictions regarding Hamas, Secretary Clinton avoided using the word "settlements," suggesting that U.S. policy on that issue remains unchanged as well. For the leading Palestinian paper Al-Quds, the similarities between the Bush and Obama administration were so striking that it referred to the new U.S. Secretary of State as "Condoleezza Clinton."

The above examples of changes in U.S. style but not U.S. policies relate to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, of which observers throughout the region take careful note. However, if one looks closely, one can find similar echoes of Bush administration policy in the Obama administration's approach across the Muslim world.

The disparity between how public diplomacy is being touted at home and how it is being received abroad this early in the new administration does not bode well. Even though the

Obama administration is composed of a new team of players with a promising new style, the political playing field has not changed. A new, forward-looking policy toward the Muslim world would require more substantive changes in both policy as well as the emotional climate. The "Changing Course" report addresses some of the specific steps needed and is correct in suggesting these are complex and long-term undertakings.

What is perhaps not stressed as strongly in the "Changing Course" approach that the Obama administration appears to be following is how integral the U.S. public is to U.S. public diplomacy. "Changing Course," like other public diplomacy reports, does stress the importance of involving the U.S. public in U.S. public diplomacy initiatives such as exchange programs, public-private partnerships or citizen diplomacy. But public participation in these programs, like the programs themselves, tends to be apolitical, and provides a buffer for deflecting hostility for U.S. policies intended for the U.S. government or administration. Where the U.S. public could instead play a critical role in strengthening U.S. public diplomacy is by intervening to reshape U.S. foreign policy. In fact, it is unlikely that U.S. policy in countries throughout the Islamic world will change until the domestic U.S. public does intervene.

## **Conclusion**

Much like the Bush administration did immediately after 9/11, the Obama administration has announced the importance of the Arab and Islamic world and is trying to lay out a vigorous and innovative public diplomacy agenda to reach the people and improve relations. Having not reached the 100-day mark, it is still too early into the Obama administration to make any public diplomacy pronouncements. While there is a deliberate effort to change the style, tone and focus of U.S. public diplomacy, the deliberate effort to sidestep the difficult questions of U.S. foreign policy remains a constant.

Until the U.S. does address the critical concerns about its policy, the Obama administration may be locked into the difficult game of trying to devise ever more innovative ways of presenting unfavorable policies to foreign publics grown increasingly skeptical of U.S. public diplomacy initiatives. Ultimately, the strategy poses the risk that the new Obama administration will run up against the same credibility crisis encountered by the Bush administration.

In the long term, perhaps through a combination of initiatives, U.S. foreign policy can be repositioned to reflect a greater consistency. The danger for Obama is the short and medium term. Given the inconsistency between policy and rhetoric, the administration cannot coast along indefinitely without eroding U.S. credibility. Here Obama can use his gift for public speaking to serve as a bridge to future action for changing policies.

Obama ran on the message of hope and change. That message resonated with people not only in the United States, but around the globe, including the Arab and Islamic worlds. People want him to succeed. For Obama to elevate the promise of hope without changing U.S. policies that undercut people's hope for a better life in their small corner of the world may be perceived as playing a dangerous game of deception. In such an



environment, relations could turn sour quickly, with a backlash worse than if no attempt had been made. On the other hand, Obama needs to bring his message of hope in line with the political constraints he faces and to communicate those limitations to the people he is trying to reach, both inside and outside the Arab and Islamic worlds. And just as he did during the election campaign, he will have to solicit over and over again, the American people's help.

Obama does appear to have the intention of changing U.S. policies. Until that policy threshold is reached, however, U.S. public diplomacy will remain a precarious balancing act between holding out the promise of change and making that change happen.

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*Photo: Muslim pilgrim at Masjid Al Haram. Mecca, Saudi Arabia (photo by Ali Mansuri, licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike 2.5 License](#)).*

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Notes:

[1] In fact, the report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Strategic Communication (January 2008) covers many of these same points with ample explanation and detail.