

Public Diplomacy for a New Era

Walter Douglas

You don't hear much about public diplomacy these days. Following September 11, however, strategic communications and messaging were all the rage. Americans asked themselves why some people in the Middle East would do such a thing. The sense was that if we could communicate to people in that wider region, we could overcome misunderstanding and prevent another attack on America.

Public diplomacy soared into the limelight. Reports and studies were commissioned as America looked for answers to how we communicate with the Muslim world. Hundreds of recommendations were offered—some were implemented, most were not. Still, communicating with Muslim populations remained problematic. In retrospect, it should have been no surprise considering that the reports focused overwhelmingly on Washington, not on what actually happens in Muslim countries. In fact, public diplomacy officers with experience in Muslim countries were largely left out.

This was reflected in the recommendations, where the vast majority were Washington related—calls for increasing budgets, more language training, setting up new offices, reorganizing the bureaucracy, or creating private-public partnerships. Real improvements in public diplomacy will only come about through insights culled from decades of experience in the field from officers who understand what works in Muslim countries and what does not.

The first question we must ask is whether “we” understand “them”? Each country and region is vastly different. A Muslim from Algeria has a different interest in Palestinians than one from Saudi Arabia. Typically policymakers settle for one-size-fit-all approaches, reflecting the focus on Washington-based solutions. In fact, public diplomacy requires different priorities in each country.

This leads us to what we are trying to do. Are we trying to “tell America’s story,” as the former U.S. Information Agency mantra would have it? Or are we trying to change behavior within a country, primarily away from violence or “radical extremist views.” Once again, each country is different, and these (or additional) priorities need to be balanced by each embassy.

Real improvements in public diplomacy will only come about through insights culled from decades of experience in the field from officers who understand what works in Muslim countries and what does not.



Public environments in each country are rigged against us. They are not blank tableaus that wait for messaging from America. Freedom House ranks Pakistan 134 out of 196 in its index of press freedom. Most countries in the Middle East aren't significantly different. Communicating in these countries calls for different skills.

The basics count. Social media is important, but not like it is in the United States. Each country is different, but many Muslim countries are not wealthy enough or literate enough to support a large online culture. The eyes are on broadcast, and more narrowly in professional and educational exchanges. That is where we need to be.

English language usage is simply not effective. In Pakistan, the English-language media reaches .01 percent of the media-consuming public. In fact, the debate in Muslim countries is carried on in Arabic, Urdu, Turkish, and other vernacular languages. Look at the bibliography of most Western studies of the region. Vernacular sourcing is extremely rare. Do we believe that

an authoritative report could be written on the United States without English-language sources?

Most of the Washington-driven studies and reports say the tight security at our embassies is intimidating and unfriendly. How important is that? Most of the people we want to influence would never go into an American facility anyway. A good public diplomacy officer gets out of the embassy to build connections with the institutions that serve our target audience.

There is a lot of incomplete information about what actually goes on in Muslim countries. Their countries and cultures are difficult to understand to many of us in the West. But our public diplomacy officers are a valuable source for beginning to understand them.

When the next administration settles in, it would do well to pull some public diplomacy officers back to Washington to hear from them how they think we can better communicate with the people in these vital countries. ■

(These views are the author's own and do not reflect an official U.S. government position.)