

Perspectives

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Winning the War against Islamic Extremism

by John Hughes

America and its allies have been challenged in contemporary times by three dangerous “isms.” Fascism was bred, and defeated, in Europe. Communism, now a pale and shrinking force, was nurtured in the Soviet Union, but confronted on a global platform. Islamic extremism, which exploded on American soil on September 11, 2001, is rooted in the Arab lands of the Middle East, and has developed a clientele worldwide.

Military force is necessary to engage with terrorists who continue to wage a murderous jihad against Americans in particular, and to a lesser extent against many other nationalities, and fellow Muslims. It is, however, the war of words and ideas that will ultimately determine whether moderate Islam, with which the United States has no quarrel, will prevail over Islamic extremism, whose perversion of the faith is the problem.

It is a contest in which the extremists have proved adept in the use of modern communications technology, whether it is transmitted from the remote terrain of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border, Somalia or Yemen. The intent is evident: As Osama bin Laden’s No. 2, Ayman Al Zawahiri, made clear in a letter to the then No. 1 Al Qaeda operative in Iraq, Abu Musab Al Zarqawi, “More than half the battle is taking place on the battlefield of the media. We are in a media race....for hearts and minds.”

Public diplomacy is the critical U.S. weapon in this contest, rebutting falsehoods, and projecting a truthful picture and explanation of American policies, culture, and freedoms.

While traditional diplomacy is government-to-government, public diplomacy is conducted through media (among other means) to reach mass audiences, or elites who are influential with mass audiences.

Over the years, U.S. public diplomacy was successfully conducted by the United States Information Agency (USIA) and its allied international radios, particularly the Voice of America. As the Cold War drew to a close, Congress and the Clinton administration, intent on budget-cutting, and apparently reasoning that unfriendly regimes no longer posed any threat to the U.S., collapsed the USIA and merged its remnants into the State Department. It was a short-sighted decision which placed the VOA, along with other government radio services, under the new Broadcasting Board of Governors.

When terrorists launched their attack upon the U.S. in September of 2001, U.S. public diplomacy was in disarray. A string of government and private sector reports since have underlined its deficiencies. During the presidential election

campaign of 2008, Republican contender John McCain charged that Congress and the Clinton administration had erred in abolishing the USIA. It was, he said, “unilateral disarmament in the war of ideas.” Senator Barack Obama pledged support for public diplomacy, but when Hillary Clinton became his Secretary of State she said she did not foresee a return of the independent USIA. It was more practical, she argued, to improve the functioning of public diplomacy within the State Department.

The problem, of course, is that traditional diplomacy is inherently confidential and introverted, whereas public diplomacy practitioners are extroverts, spreading their message far and wide. Public diplomacy is a culture alien to the State Department, however able traditional diplomats may be.

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Sadly, there has been little evidence of the major reorganization and reconstruction needed to mount a forceful U.S. public diplomacy campaign against the disinformation of Islamic extremism.

Early in his administration, President Obama made speeches of outreach to the Muslim world from Cairo and Ankara. But to be successful, public diplomacy cannot be a one-shot affair with a presidential speech. It demands a long-term strategy with follow-up, amplification, and explanation. Foreign audiences need interpretation of U.S. government policies and insight into the American way of life and love of freedom. In USIA’s heyday this would have been undertaken by skilled public affairs officers attached to American embassies around the world, usually versed in the languages and culture of their assigned countries, and endowed with long-cultivated ties with local newspaper editors, TV directors, and other opinion-molders.

Today many of those positions are vacant, or being filled by junior officers. Language proficiency of officers in some Arab countries is poor or non-existent. The officers no longer report to seasoned public diplomacy professionals in their own agency, but to desk officers in the State Department.

U.S. libraries and cultural centers which used to host large numbers of visitors in foreign countries have either been closed for security reasons or are now behind fortified defenses that discourage usage.

What should be done? As I suggest in my book, "Islamic Extremism and the War of Ideas: Lessons from Indonesia," we need a new and separate public diplomacy agency, replicating some of the best programs and energy of the now-defunct USIA, but embracing new skills for communicating with a world that is changing politically and technologically. Its chief should have a seat in the president's cabinet.

Funding it in today's economic climate will be a challenge. But the U.S. was able to launch a new homeland security agency in a time of need. A new public diplomacy agency is just as relevant to the long-term security of the U.S. Even Defense Secretary Robert Gates has underscored the huge discrepancy in funding between military operations and civilian public diplomacy and, rare for most defense chiefs, suggested transferring funds from the Pentagon to a public diplomacy effort. There is some support in Congress, from Senators like Republican Richard Lugar, for a revitalized agency. Lugar says the U.S. is waging the battle of ideas with one hand tied behind its back."

A revitalized public diplomacy effort requires a substantially increased budget. It must launch a crash program to train selected public diplomacy officers in Arabic.

It should embrace the new technology (social media, Web 2.0, etc.) for reaching a younger global audience. It should vigorously expand its people-to-people exchanges—one of the most successful aspects of public diplomacy over the years.

There should be major emphasis on outreach in the areas of culture and sport, which are often able to go where politics cannot.

It should leverage the support of the private sector and America's great universities in encouraging interchanges and discourse with the Islamic world.

It should advocate the evolution of Muslim women in education.

A new regime has been established at the Broadcasting Board of Governors, which has oversight of all the government's non-military international broadcasting. It succeeds a board which made some progress but was bedeviled by political partisanship and some questionable intrusive decisions. It will need to make some tough choices and look at the effectiveness of some programs, like radio and TV broadcasting to Cuba, and Alhurra, the U.S. government's TV entry in the competitive world of Arabic-language TV, dominated by Al-Jazeera.

Finally, the U.S. should, with deft and sensitive diplomacy, both traditional and public, encourage the emergence of moderate Muslim lands like Indonesia, the largest Islamic but non-Arab country in the world, as a counterbalance to Islamic extremism. Secretary of State Clinton put it well: "If you want to know whether Islam, democracy, modernity, and women's rights can co-exist, go to Indonesia."

Turkey is another Islamic democracy that could play a similar role.

Controversial though aspects of President George W. Bush's tenure may have been, he was prescient when he declared: "The only force powerful enough to stop the rise of tyranny and terror, and replace hatred with hope, is the force of human freedom."



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