

Perspectives

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The Need for a New Narrative

by Ambassador James K. Glassman

In his speech in Cairo on June 4, President Obama laid out what he hopes will be a new strategy and a new beginning for U.S. engagement with Arab societies. From all reports, the speech had a positive impact. While I agree with nearly all the sentiments the President expressed, I think he squandered an important opportunity -- not just to alter the relationship between Americans and Arabs but also to provide clear guidance to U.S. policymakers, who are currently rudderless on the sea of strategic communications.

Obama's overall approach, which he first pronounced in his inaugural address and repeated in Istanbul and elsewhere before Cairo, is a good one: "mutual interest and mutual respect." Minus this excellent catch-phrase, the approach is largely the same as the one we were attempting in the closing years of Bush Administration.

On the subject of counter-terrorism, for example, we adopted a strategy of opposing extremist ideology and diverting young people from a path that would lead them to violence. This strategy gave us common cause with Arab societies that might disagree with our policies in Iraq and toward the Israelis and Palestinians but that recognized a dire threat from violent extremism and were willing and eager to work with the United States. Thus, mutual interest.

As for respect: Even before I became Under Secretary, I spent months reviewing the data on America's image in the world. I found three reasons for animosity: disagreement with U.S. policy, lack of understanding of U.S. policy, and a belief that Americans did not respect the views of foreigners -- even though foreigners fully understood that the U.S., like any other nation, would in the end pursue its own national interests. It seemed to me that this third reason for animosity was the easiest to address. Thus, mutual respect.

It is no secret, however, that in the mutual respect department, the U.S. had a great deal to overcome in the Bush years. President Bush -- unfairly, in my view -- was seen as a unilateralist, unconcerned about the views of others. President Obama came to office as a fresh, unusual, and sympathetic personality. He also benefited from improvements in U.S. standing that began as early as 2006, coinciding with progress in the Iraq war and a growing recognition of threats from Iran.¹

So, in Cairo, all President Obama had to do was show up. He is that powerful a figure.

In previous speeches addressed to Middle East audiences, the President apologized for the activities of the U.S. and the West in general. In Cairo, the mea culpa -- thank

goodness -- was briefer and more measured but still unnecessary and even, in some ways, counter-productive: "The relationship between Islam and the West includes centuries of co-existence and cooperation, but also conflict and religious wars. More recently, tension has been fed by colonialism that denied rights and opportunities to many Muslims, and a Cold War in which Muslim-majority countries were too often treated as proxies without regard to their own aspirations."

He then spent time talking about the achievements of Islam, the long relations between the U.S. and Arab nations (beginning with the unhappy episode of the Barbary Pirates), and about his own American story. He then made the case for "interdependence" in today's dangerous and complex world.

"The resolution of these conflicts cannot be imposed on Muslims from the outside, but the United States can help -- and our position in these struggles is clearly on the same side as the majority of Arabs."

At last, after all that throat-clearing, he came to the point of the speech: "some specific issues that I believe we must finally confront together." It turned out that "some" equaled seven. Far too many points, but let me list them here: violent extremism, the Palestinian-Israeli issue, nuclear weapons, democracy, religious freedom, women's rights, and economic opportunity. As the speech progressed, the issues got less and less airtight.

Each of the issues had merit, but it was the context in which he placed them that constituted the lost opportunity. Obama framed the issues under the heading "mutual interests," or, as I would put it, "come let us reason together." As he said: "The issues that I have described will not be easy to address. But we have a responsibility to join together on behalf of the world we seek."

I would advocate a different framework altogether, and, to understand it, we must turn to the most pernicious strategic communications threat we face in Muslim -- not just Arab -- societies. This is the widespread belief that the United States and the West have, as their grand strategy, the objective of destroying Islam and replacing it with Chris-

tianity. For example, WorldPublicOpinion.org, a project of the University of Maryland, found that about four out of five respondents in Muslim nations surveyed agreed with the proposition that the goal of the U.S., in its global policies, is to “weaken and divide the Islamic world.”² Roughly two-thirds of those polled in Muslim countries said that a U.S. goal was to “spread Christianity to the Middle East.”³

These beliefs drive a powerful narrative that informs practically every action the U.S. takes. When we intervene to help Muslims – for instance, by bringing tsunami relief – the activity is seen as laying the groundwork for a military takeover. A Pew survey found that 80 percent of Indonesians were “very” or “somewhat” worried that the U.S. could be a military threat to their country.⁴

Our main objective in strategic communications should be to change that narrative. While Obama’s speech successfully helped soften the U.S. image, it did little or nothing to address the real problem, which is the narrative itself. In fact, in some ways, he reinforced the narrative when he described the history of colonialism and what he views as the manipulation of Arabs during the Cold War. Listening to that speech, an Arab might conclude: “The new President says that times are changing, but I am not convinced. Even he says that the history of U.S. relations is one of exploitation by the West to achieve its own aims. I see that continuing.”

So what narrative can supplant the deadly one that prevails?

It is a story that focuses not on us, but on them. Here is the way I describe it:

Arab societies are today in the midst of profound change and upheaval. They are coping with the upheaval well, and, in the end, they will succeed, but the struggle is a difficult. There are three conflicts, and for each of them, the United States and other Western countries can play a supporting role. Certainly, we are deeply affected by these conflicts, and we have a stake in their outcomes. But the conflicts are within Muslim societies. They are endogenous, not imposed from us or anyone else on the outside. (Here, by the way, there is a distinct break with the Obama analysis in the Cairo speech and earlier statements, which apologized for the U.S. role in mucking things up.)

What are the three conflicts?

1. Violent extremism. A vicious Bolshevik-style minority, intolerant and bent on seizing power, is trying to wrest control of a great religion from the vast majority of Muslims.
2. Democracy. Within most Arab countries, people are trying to determine their own destinies and are being thwarted by authoritarian regimes.
3. Iran. A Persian nation is attempting to become the dominant force in the Middle East, holding sway over Arabs.⁵

The United States could disappear off the face of the Earth tomorrow – or disarm and decide to become another Finland – and these conflicts would persist. Muslim societies are undergoing a period of revolutionary ferment, much like the Reformation, the Enlightenment, or the Industrial Revolution. The resolution of these conflicts

cannot be imposed on Muslims from the outside, but the United States can help – and our position in these struggles is clearly on the same side as the majority of Arabs (against violent extremism, in favor of democracy, and against Iranian hegemony). Still, when the conflicts are resolved, the achievement will be a matter of great accomplishment and an occasion of great pride – for Arabs. It is their struggle, just as the American Revolution was ours.

If President Obama had laid out this narrative in his speech, he would have sent a clear signal not just to Arabs but also to the Americans who work for him. The great project for public diplomacy and strategic communications should be to reinforce this narrative.

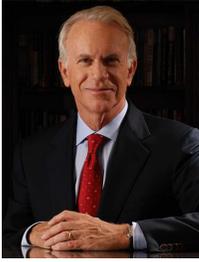
The emphasis should be on them (Muslims) and not on us (Americans). We have done far too much explaining of ourselves in our public diplomacy. I find all the self-justification irritating myself. Imagine how a Jordanian feels!

Specifically, our job should be to facilitate, convene, and enable a conversation that reinforces this true narrative of Arab societies. We can do that through many means: television, radio, social networking on the Internet. Much of the best work will be done by non-Americans and by private-sector partners. This is not a job for an army of foreign service officers or soldiers to march off and do.

This approach fits perfectly within the Obama slogan, “mutual interest and mutual respect.” We have common cause to achieve the right resolution of the conflicts and, by focusing our attention on Muslim societies rather than on America, we exhibit respect.

President Obama is on the right track, but, perhaps because of the crush of other business and perhaps because he so skillful himself as a public diplomat, he and his colleagues, I am afraid, have not thought the strategy through. The challenge is not really so difficult, but it requires a richer, deeper, more sophisticated, and more focused strategic communications effort.

1. See the results of the latest Pew Global Attitudes survey, released July 23. Favorability ratings for the U.S. bottomed in 2006 or 2007: <http://pewglobal.org>.
2. WorldPublicOpinion.org, Program on International Policy Attitudes, University of Maryland, “Muslim Opinion on US Policy, Attacks on Civilians and al Qaeda,” April 24, 2007. A press release summarizing the study began, “An in-depth poll of four major Muslim countries has found that in all of them large majorities believe that undermining Islam is a key goal of US foreign policy.” See <http://worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/346.php?lb=brme&pnt=346&nid=&id=>.
3. Ibid
4. “America’s Image in the World: Findings from the Pew Global Attitudes Project, Testimony of Andrew Kohut, Pew Research Center, before the Committee on Foreign Affairs, U.S. House of Representatives, March 14, 2007.
5. For more on this, see “What Obama Should Tell Muslims,” by Juan C. Zarate and James K. Glassman, Boston Globe, May 29, 2009: http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2009/05/27/what_obama_should_tell_muslims/



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