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# Grassroots Diplomacy: Get Back to Basics in U.S. Outreach to the Muslim World

April 2007

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In late 2005, Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Karen Hughes embarked on a series of what she termed “listening tours” of the Muslim world. Her itinerary, which included Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Indonesia and Malaysia, was billed as an effort to open healthy dialog and invite productive criticism. Experts called it “blundering,” “preachy and culturally insensitive,” a “superficial PR blitz,” and a “fiasco” for U.S.-Muslim relations. Despite this stunning failure, the Administration continues to treat America’s languishing image in the Muslim world as traditional PR problem, and its latest plans call for bulking up State Department staff, targeting “key audiences” with new “core messages,” and adopting communications strategies from the corporate world.

But these are tactics for spinning and packaging the U.S.-Muslim relationship, not for changing it from the ground up. Slick corporate messaging makes poor use of this country’s most valuable communications resource—our citizens. It is individual Americans interacting directly and personally with Muslims who misunderstand, mistrust or dislike our country that offers the only real hope of rebuilding trust, friendship and full partnership against terrorism. This direct, personal contact is called grassroots diplomacy, and it has been happening for as long as Americans have traveled abroad or welcomed visitors to our shores.

Recent history yields both immensely positive and severely damaging examples of grassroots diplomacy between Americans and foreign citizens of Muslim lands. Our best moments have come when individual American doctors and medics have helped save Iraqi, Afghan, and Palestinian lives, when American volunteers have personally delivered aid to disaster victims in Indonesia, Malaysia and Pakistan, and when wary survivors of violence in Africa, Central Asia and the Balkans have discovered that their selfless caregivers and protectors come from the U.S. We are all too familiar with the low points: Abuses of power in places like Mahmoudiya, Haditha and Abu Ghraib; accusations of unfair profiling, detentions and discrimination; and a military occupation demonstrating such “cultural insensitivity,” in the eyes of one observer, that, “it arguably amounted to institutional racism.”

Though these troubling cases are exceptions to a rule of loyalty, humanitarianism, and sacrifice by Americans interacting with the Muslim world, their impact on Muslim public opinion is disproportionately large. In part, this stems from the psychological maxim that human beings are egocentric learners—we tend to assign lessons from personal experience greater weight than we give to information received from other sources, and we are more likely to comprehend or act on facts of individual significance than those of impersonally large dimensions. Grassroots diplomacy’s impact—positive or negative—is also magnified by the global media. For both

television and print news, personal stories make far better copy than the latest heavily vetted statement from the White House, the Pentagon or the Green Zone.

If we acknowledge the importance of grassroots diplomacy for America's image in the Muslim world, how can we ensure that grassroots interactions help that image rather than hurt it? To start with, we must consistently, quickly, and publicly investigate misconduct by Americans in the war on terror. Prosecutions cannot simply railroad low-ranking wrongdoers while exonerating superiors who have allowed lax discipline or aided cover-ups. Since the famous Vietnam-era trial of Lt. Calley, well-meaning patriots have argued that airing our own "dirty laundry" to the world hurts us and helps the enemy. If that was ever true, the speed with which news and rumors circulate in the modern media makes it glaringly false today. We can be certain that when Americans abuse their power as occupiers, the entire Muslim world will know about it, and equally certain that only swift, genuine justice can both defuse resulting anti-Americanism and deter repetition.

But it is not just U.S. soldiers whose behavior influences our global image. As much as possible, government officials, businesspeople and even tourists making frequent trips to Muslim countries should be required to possess basic language, cultural and diplomatic knowledge. The 9/11 Commission called for U.S. investment in education for young Muslims, seeking to open their eyes to America's promise of a brighter future worldwide. Why invest in the open-mindedness of others, and not in the preparedness of our own citizens to lead by example?

Finally, we should not fire our spin masters and spokesmen, but direct them to respond more pointedly to grassroots diplomacy in the media. Instead of marketing an "American message" with slogans and speeches, we should help give positive examples of Americans volunteering and doing business in the Muslim world the broadest possible exposure, if only to offset the ripple effects of occasional failures.

Though we should recalibrate our communications strategies to take advantage of grassroots resources, we must also accept that there is no such thing as a perfect relationship between states and peoples separated by language, history and national interest. Every society, and especially one oppressed by autocrats and denied basic freedoms, is susceptible to jingoism and demagoguery that can undermine the friendliest, most productive grassroots diplomacy between citizens. America's public outreach to the Muslim world should build bridges between individuals that can support future international cooperation, even when anger and skepticism reign on both sides.

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