

## **Assessing U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab World: Is It Working?**

### *Speakers*

- Hala Kotb, Director of International Marketing and Communications, Zogby International
- Dr. Tamara Cofman Wittes, Research Fellow, Saban Center for Middle East Policy, The Brookings Institution
- Hafez Al-Mirazi, Washington Bureau Chief, Al-Jazeera Television

### *Moderator*

- Mohamed Hakki, Advisory Committee Member, USEF

**Mohamed Hakki**, USEF Advisory Committee Member, welcomed the participants and introduced the expert panel.

The panel began with **Hala Kotb**, Director of International Marketing and Communications, Zogby International, giving a presentation on the results of a number of recent surveys by Zogby International that demonstrate the effectiveness of recent U.S. public diplomacy in several Arab nations.

Kotb opened with a power point presentation demonstrating current trends in Arab opinions of the U.S. in various fields. First she showed that given current news choices, Arabs greatly preferred Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya and Abu Dhabi to U.S. government funded Al-Hurra. Subsequent slides showed relatively middling views by Arabs of different aspects of American culture, politics and the ability for the U.S. to help.

Her next series of slides showed a contrast between 2002 and 2004 and demonstrated a general falling in views of the U.S. in several Arab countries, especially in terms of foreign policy. Subsequent polls demonstrated that Arabs who have had contact with Americans, either by visiting the U.S. or by meeting Americans tend to have much higher positive views of the country as a whole. Then she showed that only in Lebanon do people believe the U.S. can aid in political reform. Other polls suggested that the U.S. could help in solving the Israel/Palestine conflict, but demonstrated skepticism about the U.S. approach to terrorism.

Kotb demonstrated that the two top priorities for Arabs are improvements in quality of life and a solution to the Palestinian situation. She added that Americans would generally benefit from learning much more about the Arab world, as many are simply unfamiliar with the Arab world. Next she showed some views on why travel to the U.S. has decreased since 9/11, centering on the perception of “fortress America” not wanting Arabic visitors anymore. Conversely, American firms are finding it more difficult to do business in the Arab world. Many companies have to downplay connections to U.S. firms and distance themselves from such associations. Finally, Kotb noted although public diplomacy efforts regarding media have proven to be ineffective in the region, due to issues of trust surrounding media, directing funds towards exchange programs and

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combating illiteracy in the region would be invaluable as far as U.S. public diplomacy initiatives are concerned.

**Dr. Tamara Cofman Wittes**, Research Fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy, The Brookings Institution, pointed out that the negative perceptions the U.S. faces pre-date 9/11 and the invasion of Iraq, and require a long-term solution. She argued that the U.S. should not try to cultivate an artificial view of itself for the world, but rather highlight the complexities within America in an honest manner.

She pointed to two common but insufficient explanations of why the U.S. is confronted with suspicion and mistrust; one based on reflections of policies regarding Israel/Palestine and Iraq, and the other based on perceptions that American values “clash” with those of the Arab world. Instead, she argued that the US suffers from the inherited legacy of the colonial era, in which any Western intervention is suspect. Secondly, there is a general suspicion of American intentions and American power in the post-Cold War era, where America is the only global hegemon.

Wittes next pointed out that public diplomacy can be defined in multiple ways: to improve the image of the U.S. government, to win support for American policies, to combat extremism or to provide a positive view of America generally. Effective public diplomacy, she noted, begins with catching the attention of foreign audiences and engaging them so perceptions may change.

Instead of presenting a cohesive and homogenous image of America to the world, the U.S. could help the Arab world understand America better by displaying American life, culture and politics in all its complexity and highlighting internal American debates on key questions. Wittes stated that the only way to bridge gaps with the Arab world is through honesty, particularly regarding the motives for American policy. As an example, she referenced the current push for democratic reform by the Bush administration. This is generally explained in an abstract manner, she said, through reference to universal values. Instead, she suggested, the U.S. Government could overcome Arab suspicions better by detailing the strategic self-interest that drives America to support reform in the region, including acknowledging that the U.S. Government feels the relationship between states and societies in Arab countries is broken.

She concluded with a reference to Kotb’s presentation and stressed that even minimal encounters by Arabs with Americans greatly improve those people’s view of the U.S. as a whole. Therefore, the U.S. should work to increase the number of academic exchanges, lectures and other public encounters and to fix the visa system so that more Arabs can enjoy personal interaction with Americans.

**Hafez Al-Mirazi**, Washington Bureau Chief for Al-Jazeera Television, began his remarks by stating that public diplomacy has had positive impacts and should be encouraged. Instead of perceiving it as a waste of resources, he maintained that it is actually under-funded, in comparisons to other countries such as the Netherlands. Al-Mirazi went on to explaining that anti-American sentiments are felt around the world. In

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his view, when there is only one global power and it is seen to act unilaterally, these problems are inherent. He pointed to the difference between President George H.W. Bush's 1991 multilateral success in the First Gulf War versus the current administration's unilateral actions and perceived arrogance. Currently he said there are two main grievances against the U.S. in the Arab world. The first is the perception of bias towards the Israeli government – no matter who is in that government at that time the U.S. will follow their directives. Secondly, there is an appearance of supporting dictatorships in the region in favor of stability.

Next, Al-Mirazi went on to argue that public diplomacy should not simply convey what the U.S. wish to stand for. Arabs appreciate American values, such as liberty and freedom for all. The problem is the perceived absence of these values in US policies towards the region. This can only lead to disappointment from high expectations. Given the polarization inside the US towards the current administration policies, the US should take a more humble approach and apply public diplomacy more for damage control rather than “winning the hearts and minds.”

Al-Mirazi then lamented over the loss of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA). He said that the USIA was respected and staffed with experts who offered public libraries and scholarships abroad to bring foreigners in touch with America. He added that while Voice of America worked for decades to build confidence among its listeners its replacements, Radio Sawa and Al-Hurra Television, are seen instead as explicit propaganda. He then concluded that people widely admire the American system and that even scandals, such as the Monika Lewinsky affair showed Arabs that the U.S. had a healthy system in place.

### *Q&A Highlights*

*Q:* First, some people have the viewpoint that we shouldn't care about what Arabs think. Could you please comment on that? Secondly you presented a debate of values versus policies, but in the Arab world it is the policies that have the impact, especially in the Arab/Israeli conflict.

*Wittes:* There is a current of that thinking, but we can't have a policy of increasing democracy and then say we don't care what the Arab public thinks of us. If we are serious about Arab democracy, we must be serious about public diplomacy. To the second point, the numbers show perceptions of the US have gotten worse between 2002 and 2004, while US policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict did not change – so some other factors must help explain this sentiment. Nonetheless, clearly an improved peace process would improve perceptions of the United States.

*Q:* Regarding Egypt, what can be done for public diplomacy to reach the rest of the population?

*Kotb:* They say they don't watch the news on Al-Hurra, they just watch “Friends” for free. Overall we are concerned that U.S. sponsored media will not work. The slow process, such as exchanges, are much more beneficial in the long run.

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*Al-Mirazi:* I think with government controlled media, they don't have credibility. The U.S. is constantly pushing for the privatization of the media in the Middle East, but then when one looks at the way the U.S. has handled the media in Iraq, it is no better than the former Soviet publications in Afghanistan.