THE BROOKINGS PROJECT ON U.S. POLICY TOWARDS THE ISLAMIC WORLD

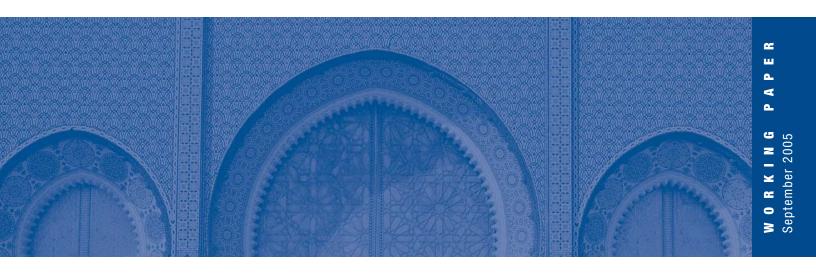


THE CONQUEST OF MUSLIM HEARTS AND MINDS? PERSPECTIVES ON U.S. REFORM AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY STRATEGIES

By Abdelwahab El-Affendi



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NOTE FROM THE PROJECT CONVENORS

The Brookings Project on U.S. Policy Towards the Islamic World is designed to respond to some of the most difficult challenges that the United States will face in the coming years, most particularly how to prosecute the continuing war on global terrorism and radicalism while still promoting positive relations with Muslim states and communities. A key part of the Project is the production of Working Papers written by outside scholars and visitors that discuss significant issues that affect American policy towards the Islamic world.

In the last two years, the level of attention paid to such challenges as supporting reform and improving U.S. public diplomacy has skyrocketed and a wave of new policy initiatives have been launched. However, while revived U.S. interest in engaging with the Muslim world is a welcome development, the efforts have met with much criticism on the receiving end of the dialogue, in areas ranging from attacks on their style and direction to their substance and strategy.

In seeking to understand this disconnect, it is useful to examine the issue from various perspectives, most particularly looking at the issue from outside the Washington vantage point. As such, we are pleased to present *The Conquest of Muslim Hearts and Minds? Perspectives on U.S. Reform and Public Diplomacy Strategies* by Abdelwahab El-Affendi. A noted thinker and commentator, originally from Sudan, Dr. El-Affendi is co-ordinator of the Democracy and Islam Programme at the University of Westminster in London. In exploring how to win Muslim hearts and minds at a critical time in history, he deftly examines the connection between an earnest and sincere democratic reform strategy and a successful public diplomacy campaign. In turn, he raises the deeper complications that underlie both strategies and affect U.S. credibility in particularly the Middle East, and the broader Muslim world. We appreciate his contribution to the Project's work and certainly are proud to share his views on this important issue with the wider public.

We are also grateful for the generosity and cooperation of the Carnegie Corporation, the Education for Employment Foundation, the Ford Foundation, Lawrence Livermore National Laboratories, the MacArthur Foundation, the Government of Qatar, the United States Institute of Peace, Haim Saban, and the Brookings Institution for their backing of various Project's activities. We would also like to acknowledge the hard work of Rabab Fayad, Elina Noor, and Arif Rafiq for their support of the Project's publications.

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Educated at the Universities of Khartoum, Wales, and Reading, El-Affendi is author of Turabi's Revolution: Islam and Power in Sudan (1991), Who Needs an Islamic State? (1991), Rethinking Islam and Modernity (2001) and For a State of Peace: Conflict and the Future of Democracy in Sudan (2002). He has contributed to many leading journals, and to such works as The Routledge Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (1998), Social Science and Conflict Analysis (1993), Islam and Secularism in the Middle East (2000), Understanding Democratic Politics (2003), Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century (2004) and American Power in the 21st Century (2004). Dr. El-Affendi's work with Brookings was supported by the Ford Foundation.

Note: The views expressed in this piece are those of the author and should not be attributed to the staff, officers or trustees of The Brookings Institution

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

r. Abdelwahab El-Affendi, a leading expert on democratization in the Muslim world, provides an outside vantage point on the recent enthusiasm in U.S. policy circles for engagement with and reform in the Muslim world. He lays out the perspective that, in general, the renewed U.S. interest is certainly a welcome development, even when it comes about for the wrong reasons. However, he cautions that the difficulties faced so far by the United States are not just a matter of technique or style. When the country which commands unchallenged hegemony in both the technology and the art of communication appears unable to get its message across, it can only be a symptom of a deeper concern.

El-Affendi finds that the problem stems from adopting an American-centered strategy, which focused on American understanding, needs, fears and aspirations, and then proceeded to try to shape the world accordingly. Devising a public diplomacy campaign, which has been closely linked and integrated with the military/intelligence apparatus, and billed as a part to the "war on terror" it thus presented an instrumentalist and hegemonistic approach, which shows little respect for Muslim intellects or sensibilities and thus is hamstrung from the start. A deeper problem relates to the common assumptions that there is something fundamentally wrong with Islam and Muslim populations, which can only be cured by outside input,

whether in the shape of "education" or induced social and political reform.

The question of whether the rise in violent anti-Americanism could be blamed on what is wrong with America or what is wrong with the Middle East is also a problematic starting point. El-Affendi argues, that both answers are partially right. There is plenty that is wrong with the way the United States has conducted itself in the region, while at the same time there is plenty that is wrong with Middle Eastern governments and societies.

By encouraging reform, but only within limited bounds for its autocratic allies, and launching campaigns of public diplomacy, the current administration has opted for curing the ills abroad first. This will be an uphill task, especially given America's low reservoir of credibility in the region. The tools adopted are also discouraging; since the impression in the region is that the United States is resorting to propaganda, manipulation, and even religious subversion. Until they can establish their credibility, the limited U.S. programs in democratization, public diplomacy, and other reform efforts, will thus appear as a half-hearted campaign to conquer, rather than win, Muslim minds (and no attempt at hearts).

The challenge is to untangle the web of assumptions linking despotism, terrorism, religious extremism and the current strategies in the areas of democracy promotion and public diplomacy based on these assumptions. He rejects the widely accepted argument which links anti-Americanism and terrorism to specific religious motives, and argues that attempts to deal with the problem through promoting "religious reform" is both dangerous and misguided. He also dismisses the even more common argument that democracy could be a direct cure for terrorism. Instead, the drive to promote political reform and democratization in the Middle East should be supported for its own sake.

To achieve success, any strategy for engagement with the Muslim world must not be viewed as an exercise in propaganda or as an extension of the war effort. Instead, it has to be a serious dialogue about policies and politics. To be effective, this dialogue must engage genuine representatives of the target communities. As U.S. officials now ritually admit, the problem of U.S. policy has for a long time been its predilection to talk to the wrong people, mainly entrenched dictators, who were themselves out of touch with their people, or an isolated fringe of the pro-Western, secular elite. But it is yet to take the next obvious step. The admission of an error in policy should be followed by a change in policy. Other than continuing complicity in corrupt oppression, there is no alternative to sincere and resolute support for democratic reform in the Middle East and other Muslim regions.

Thus, El-Affendi concludes, the United States is presently trying to walk a tight-rope between engaging the populace in public diplomacy dialogue while still doing business with regimes it has openly identified as their oppressors; officials want to have their despotic cake and eat it too. The problem of U.S. advocacy of reform is not that it is too intrusive, as the complaint often is, but that it is too timid and half-hearted. It is perceived as such, and thus regarded as insincere, further contributing to the crisis of U.S. credibility. The solution is not to engage in yet another sales pitch, but to embark on a genuine political engagement based on mutual respect and the sincere search for workable policies. El-Affendi cautions that this process will not bring an immediate, silver bullet solution, as politics will sometimes exact a price. That is, support for reform may not always succeed, nor will the outcome always please its advocates. But the policy so far, of trying to play the game but avoid the costs, has only led to greater peril.

THE CONQUEST OF MUSLIM HEARTS AND MINDS?

PERSPECTIVES ON U.S. REFORM AND PUBLIC DIPLOMACY STRATEGIES

llustrating the bleak state of public opinion of the United States in the Middle East, the Kuwaitbased conglomerate, Americana, recently began an advertising campaign under the slogan, "Americana: 100% Arab." The company—one of the largest food production and distribution firms in the Gulfwas named in an era in which Brand America sold itself in the region with little salesmanship needed. Distancing oneself from Brand America now, in sharp contrast to the past, appears to make business and political sense even in Kuwait, a country the U.S. military liberated a little over a decade ago. Similarly, to counter persistent calls for a boycott by anti-American protesters at the height of the Palestinian intifada, the McDonald's chain in Saudi Arabia ran a campaign pledging contributions to Palestinian charities for every meal sold. Desperate times call for desperate measures.

It is as alarming as it is puzzling that selling Brand America in the Arab world has become as challenging as selling British beef in Argentina at the height of the mad cow disease. Polls conducted by the Pew Global Attitudes Project in May 2005 reveal that despite improvement over the last year, public

opinion in the region is heavily weighed against the United States.¹ A majority of Lebanese, Jordanians and Moroccans hold negative views of the United States. In fact, 80 percent of the population of Jordan, a U.S. ally and free trade partner, views the United States unfavorably. A June 2004 poll conducted by the Washington-based Arab American Institute demonstrated widespread dislike for the United States across the region. Approximately 98 percent of Egyptians and Saudis polled expressed unfavorable views of United States.²

America has long had an endemic image problem, captured once by the motif of the "ugly American." The current decline in esteem for the United States is, however, part of a worldwide trend that has been ascribed to various factors, including local corruption scandals and foreign wars.³ Anti-Americanism, some argue, is deeply rooted even in European thought. Additionally, such resentment can be seen as the inevitable fate of great powers. Empires have always been the object of awe, envy and sometimes respect, but never love.⁴ However, even in its Middle East manifestation, where anti-Americanism is influenced by hostility to U.S. policies, the phenomenon still remains

¹ Pew Research Center, Pew Global Attitudes Project, "U.S. Image Up Slightly, But Still Negative," 23 June 2005.

² Dafna Linzer, "Poll Shows Growing Arab Rancor at US," The Washington Post, 23 July 2004.

³ Mandy de Wall and Janice Spark, "Brand America's deteriorating image bad for business," *Biz-Community*, 19 September 2004, http://www.biz-community.com/PressOffice/PressRelease.aspx?i=451&ai=4607.

⁴ Walter Laqueur, No end to war: terrorism in the twenty-first century (New York: Continuum, 2003), 161-177.

puzzling. It takes much effort to become the villain of the peace in a picture where actors like Saddam appear as "victims"⁵ or, as Richard Holbrooke once remarked, "to be out-communicated by a man in a cave."⁶

America enjoyed a huge initial advantage, in particular in the Gulf, where the regimes were friendly and the people enchanted with the United States and its cultural and material products. Until the end of the 1980's, even the bulk of Islamist forces remained largely pro-western or neutral. After witnessing a dramatic boost in the wake of the Kuwait crisis in 1990, the decline in America's standing in the Gulf accelerated sharply to the extent that not only did the bulk of the 9/11 attackers come from the Gulf, but their acts were greeted with thinly disguised glee in Saudi Arabia and some other Gulf countries.

This rising tide of anti-Americanism has been linked to the surge in terrorism and anti-American violence, making the battle to "win hearts and minds" in the Middle East and surrounding Muslim lands a strategic priority for the Bush administration under the umbrella of the "war of ideas." The premises on which this campaign is being waged posit an intimate connection between terrorism directed against America and the lack of democracy in the region, coupled with the rise of intolerant ideologies such as radical Islamism. The need for a concerted strategy to engage Muslim societies in dialogue and help advance much needed political reform and modernization in them is thus no longer seen as a luxurious exercise in international benevolence, but a vital national security priority.

But this paradigm is highly problematic. The focus of this dual campaign to win the hearts and minds and support political reform is unabashedly and transparently the promotion of American interests. This narrow focus on short-term American interests and the promotion of the American worldview are the very

bases of anti-American resentment. As a result, this campaign will hardly improve matters.

In what follows, I will argue that some of the premises on which this campaign is based are dangerously misleading, and the measures envisioned could in fact exacerbate the problem rather than resolve it. The link between Islamism and terrorism is at best contingent. The problem, in fact, relates more to widespread anti-Americanism based on some U.S. policies or popular perceptions of them. Similarly, while support for democracy is commendable and the only basis of a healthy relationship between the United States and the Muslim world, the link between terrorism and the absence of democracy is also tenuous and contingent. Consequently, the reduction of tensions between America and the Muslim world, which is beneficial to both sides, requires more than a campaign of public diplomacy and public relations. A radical rethinking of current strategies and their intellectual presuppositions is necessary. The starting point of this process is the recognition of the dysfunctional role, lack of legitimacy, and unrepresentativeness that characterizes the state as a structure in much of the Muslim world. This condition is demonstrated by the primacy of the U.S. public diplomacy campaign, which is directed toward the general Muslim public, rather than the governments in the Muslim world. This indicates the existence of a moral and institutional vacuum at the heart of the region's political landscape. For the United States to wade into this chaos without a clear vision about where it is going is a recipe for dangerous entanglement into a web of unresolved conflicts.

The nature of the problem is illustrated by the world-wide Muslim protests following a report by *Newsweek* about the alleged desecration of the Qur'an at the Guantanamo Bay detention center in May 2004.⁷ In that episode, the relevant regional governments were conspicuous by their absence in handling the incident

⁵ Abdelwahab El-Affendi, "Waiting for Armageddon: The 'Mother of All Empires' and its Middle Eastern Quagmire," in eds. David Held and Mathias Koenig-Archibugi, *American Power in the 21st Century* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

⁶ Richard Holbrooke, "Get the Message Out," The Washington Post, 28 October 2001.

⁷ Michael Isikoff and John Barry, "Gitmo: SouthCom Showdown," Newsweek, 9 May 2005.

diplomatically and in responding to the concerns of the public at large. The public also treated their own governments as irrelevant, not even bothering to protest against them. It was as if no recognized political authority existed in the vast expanse of territory between Washington and Kabul, with the United States feeling obliged to deal directly with the angry multitudes without the benefit of mediating allies, or even foes. This raises many questions of vital importance: Where were the Muslim governments in this drama? Where were the elites, intellectuals, religious leaders, etc.? Whatever they were doing, the "leaders" were not leading as far this episode was concerned. This is one major aspect of the problem.

Additionally, some of the public diplomacy and communication strategies adopted by the Bush administration are excessively simplistic, superficial and instrumentalist. They often discuss the issues exclusively from the perspective of American interests without making sufficient effort to develop a universal perspective of shared values from which to advance the arguments for policy. They also alternate between ignoring the deeply diverging perspectives and symbolic baggage that inform the debate on both sides, and between smuggling that symbolic baggage unwittingly into the discourse. Thus, we find interlocutors on both sides trying at times to skirt around the traumatic impact of recent events on the respective communities, or to overlook the way these events have stirred deep feelings and fears and mobilized deeply ingrained prejudices and senses of identity. However, at the same time, language expressive of these deeply felt impulses seeps into the discourse. There is mentioning of "crusades," "Islamic threat," and "defense of civilization," on one side and "jihad," a "war on Islam," and "imperialist designs" on the other.

Complaints have also been made about poor targeting and conceptualization of public diplomacy initiatives, such as the "shared values" advertising campaign

aired in 2002, which featured American Muslims of Middle Eastern origin, even though its main target had been South East Asia. That campaign has also been criticized for skirting around important issues about U.S. policy and focusing on "peripheral issues," such as the status of Muslims living in America. However, these criticisms are not entirely fair. Better targeting is indeed called for, but it was the overall context that was problematic. The portrayal of successful and integrated Muslim U.S. citizens, regardless of their origin, would have had a positive impact on Muslim audiences, had it not been overshadowed by other images, such as those of the Palestinian intifada, or the numerous reports during the same period about the ill treatment of Muslims living in or visiting the United States.

The gulf of misunderstanding is deepened by the openness of this debate in the United States, which is inevitable in a democratic society. Muslim audiences deeply mistrustful of American motives often do not distinguish between views expressed by fringe radical right wing intellectuals who call for a religious war on Islam and the mainstream discourse that does not subscribe to such radical views. The misunderstandings are exacerbated when proponents of radical views are seen to be close to the corridors of power. Yet one does not need to subscribe to conspiracy theories to feel threatened when following debates on the best approaches to manipulate and shape, or "subvert," Muslim societies with the cooperation of the most marginal and unrepresentative of Muslim interlocutors. An article in the Saudi Englishlanguage daily, Arab News,8 expressed dismay at revelations in U.S. News & World Report of ongoing activities by the CIA and other U.S. government agencies to secretly influence Islamic religious beliefs. Apparently, the United States has been spending millions on a "Muslim World Outreach" project, which seeks, among other things, to promote religious reform in Islam. The paper wondered whether

⁸ Linda Heard, "US and Arabs: Winning Hearts or Psychological Warfare?" Arab News, 13 May 2005, http://www.arabnews.com/?page=7§ion=0&article=63673&d=13&m=5&y=2005.

the United States was trying to win hearts and minds or to engage in psychological warfare, and argued that perceptions by Muslims of sly U.S. attempts "to alter their thinking and sway their beliefs" has made them "even more resentful and those beliefs more entrenched." In this sense, the measures designed to clear misunderstandings and bridge the gap between the United States and the Muslim world actually reinvigorates the tensions between the two communities.

FROM PUBLIC DIPLOMACY TO A "WAR OF IDEAS"

While puzzling over the sources and justification of this rampant anti-Americanism ("Who has anything against life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness?" Edward P. Djerejian wonders, quoting one Iranian interviewee) the problem is seen as one of a false picture being projected to the Arab and Muslim masses about America. As Djerejian argues in his 2003 report to Congress,

Our enemies have succeeded in spreading viciously inaccurate claims about our intentions and our actions... [Their] success in the struggle of ideas is all the more stunning because American values are so widely shared.¹⁰

To counter this, the State Department delegation argues that a more effective, better funded and more expertly run public diplomacy drive was needed, even though public diplomacy alone would not be enough. For the problem, Djerejian acknowledge, is not simply with the image, but also with the reality behind it.

We fully acknowledge that public diplomacy is only part of the picture. Surveys show much of the resentment toward America stems from our policies. It is clear, for example, that the Arab-Israeli conflict remains a visible and significant point of contention between the United States and many Arab and Muslim countries and that peace in that region, as well as the transformation of Iraq, would reduce tensions. But our mandate is clearly limited to issues of public diplomacy.¹¹

Similar conclusions were reached by the Defense Science Board's Strategic Communication Task Force in a report produced in September 2004, which concluded that the United States faces a crisis in the realm of strategic communication—under which public diplomacy, public affairs, and open international military information are covered.12 The Task Force recommended an even more radical overhaul of public communication policies across an array of government agencies, with strong presidential leadership, calling for a strategic shift in policy similar to the one that launched the Cold War in 1947. "The U.S. Government," the report concluded, "needs a strategic communication capability that is planned, directed, coordinated, funded, and conducted in ways that support the nation's interests." For this purpose, the government should set up "an independent, non-profit and non-partisan Center for Strategic Communication to support the NSC and the departments and organizations represented on its Strategic Communication Committee."13 The relevant government departments should also be radically restructured to harness their capabilities to the campaign.

These recommendations are in line with the growing belief within the Bush administration on the need to wage a "war of ideas" on the global level in order to

⁹ David E. Kaplan, "Hearts, Minds, and Dollars: In an Unseen Front in the War on Terrorism, America is Spending Millions...To Change the Very Face of Islam," U.S. News & World Report, 25 April 2005, http://www.usnews.com/usnews/news/articles/050425/25roots.htm>.

¹⁰ Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, "Changing Minds, Winning Peace: A New Strategic Direction for U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Arab & Muslim World," 1 October 2003, 8.

¹¹ Ibid., 8.

¹² Defense Science Board, Report of Task Force on Strategic Communication, September 2004, http://www.acq.osd.mil/dsb/reports/2004-09-Strategic_Communication.pdf>.

¹³ Ibid.

counter the threat of terrorism. As articulated by U.S. Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld in an interview, this approach sees the main struggle in the war on terrorism as one of ideas, necessitating the creation of a special agency to wage this war.¹⁴ The premises behind this conviction were reiterated in remarks made by Condoleezza Rice to the U.S. Institute of Peace (USIP) on August 19, 2004. In her address to the USIP, titled, "Waging the War of Ideas in the Global War on Terror," Rice stated that, in the war on terror: "True victory will come not merely when the terrorists are defeated by force, but when the ideology of death and hatred is overcome by the appeal of life and hope and when lies are replaced by truth."15 The challenge for the United States is "to get the truth about our values and our policies to the people of the Middle East, because truth serves the cause of freedom." The same ideas that won the Cold War, she added, will now win the war on terror. Rice acknowledges that Muslim grievances do have "some" basis in reality, pointing to persistent support for dictators and for Israeli policies. Moreover, she did not explain how conveying the truth about such policies could win hearts and minds without some significant modification of the policies themselves.

The proposals on the "war of ideas" also drew on the findings of the 9/11 Commission in its report published in the summer of 2004, which depicted radical Islamism as the new menace facing America. The Commission's report, one commentator argues, tells us "We're not in the middle of a war on terror.... We're not facing an axis of evil. Instead, we are in the midst of an ideological conflict." The enemy is "a loose confederation of people who believe in a perverted stream of Islam that stretches

from Ibn Taymiyya to Sayyid Qutb. Terrorism is just the means they use to win converts to their cause." ¹⁶ When the enemy is "primarily an intellectual movement, not a terrorist army," the priority becomes "to mount our own ideological counteroffensive" against this "hostile belief system that can't be reasoned with but can only be 'destroyed or utterly isolated." ¹⁷

The 9/11 Commission's report called for a genuine dialogue with Muslims, support for democracy and openness and a more robust promotion of American values and followed the Djerejian report in using the more measured term "struggle of ideas," as opposed to the "war of ideas." 18 It also advocated "moral leadership" by example rather than moral indoctrination and acknowledged that religious reform is a matter for Muslims.¹⁹ Other commentators, however, went so far as to describe the proposed conflict as nothing short of a religious war.²⁰ Yet other more radical commentators argued that the problem was not just one of radical Islam, nor even exclusively with Islam itself, but with religion itself. "Intolerance," one author argues, "is thus intrinsic to every creed."21 Religious "moderation" does not solve the problem of religion, since "it offers no bulwark against religious extremism and religious violence," being itself problematic and devoid of religious authority. In the final analysis, moderation appears to be "nothing more than an unwillingness to submit to God's law." 22 Moderation is also problematic since it forms part of the liberal "political correctness" ethic, which holds back from saying anything too critical "about the people who really believe in the God of their fathers, because tolerance, perhaps above all else, is sacred."23 The solution is therefore not, as recommended

¹⁴ Bill Gertz, "Rumsfeld pushes 'new sense of urgency," *The Washington Times*, 23 October 2003, http://washingtontimes.com/national/20031023-114713-4202r.htm.

¹⁵ Office of the White House, "Dr. Rice Addresses War on Terror: Remarks by National Security Advisor Condoleeza Rice Followed by Question and Answer to the U.S. Institute of Peace," 19 August 2004, http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/08/20040819-5.html>.

¹⁶ David Brooks, "War of Ideology," The New York Times, 24 July 2004.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "The 9/11 Commission Report," 22 July 2004, 18–19, http://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf>.

¹⁹ Ibid., 263-4 and 376-7.

²⁰ Shmuel Bar, "The Religious Sources of Islamic Terrorism," Policy Review, no. 125 (June-July 2004), http://www.policyreview.org/jun04/bar.htm>.

²¹ Sam Harris, The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004), 13.

²² Ibid., 20-21.

²³ Ibid., 22.

by the 9/11 Commission and the commentators cited earlier, to leave religious reform for the believers in each faith, but to abandon the liberal ethic of toleration and "begin to speak plainly about the absurdity of most of our religious beliefs."²⁴

Closely related to this is the position which rejects the claim that religiously instigated violence is not just an issue of a small minority of extremists, but also involves "a substantial periphery of sympathizers" and is fed by a deeply felt "Muslim rage" that is "unlikely to disappear in the near future." Or according to others, it is the sharp end of a worldwide "Muslim insurgency" directed against the West. ²⁶

TALKING ACROSS THE DIVIDE

We can see even at this point how the public diplomacy campaign being advocated in this context is like no other. Simply conceived, public diplomacy is an attempt to communicate a certain message from one country to a given audience in another, or as one commentator succinctly put it, "the art of selling a country's positions to overseas audiences." While initially conceived by the concerned officials as an exercise of marketing, essentially as a monologue, it inevitably ends up as a dialogue, since the messengers will have to gauge the impact of their message and fine tune it in the light of the feedback they receive. This means having to develop a better understanding of the audience by listening as well as speaking. Additionally, the whole process is seen as one of bringing peoples closer together.

However, when public diplomacy campaigns are discussed in conflicting terms (e.g. a "war of ideas") and seen as extensions of military campaigns (i.e. the "war on terror") we seem to be treading on unfamiliar ground. Yet this might not be entirely unfamiliar

ground, since there is the often-cited precedent of the Cold War. Public diplomacy is a form of propagandizing. But there is still a clear distinction between wartime propaganda and regular public relations conducted by a democratic government during peacetime. The United States, it appears, has opted for the propaganda approach. According to a recent account of this new crusade, "the U.S. government has embarked on a campaign of political warfare unmatched since the height of the Cold War."

From military psychological-operations teams and CIA covert operatives to openly funded media and think tanks, Washington is plowing tens of millions of dollars into a campaign to influence not only Muslim societies but Islam itself.... Although U.S. officials say they are wary of being drawn into a theological battle, many have concluded that America can no longer sit on the sidelines as radicals and moderates fight over the future of a politicized religion with over a billion followers. The result has been an extraordinary—and growing—effort to influence what officials describe as an Islamic reformation.²⁸

In a charged atmosphere, in which violence is the dominant mode of "communication," attempts at cross-cultural exchanges get inevitably entangled into a "war of symbols," where language says at once much more and much less than it habitually does. Every gesture becomes loaded. Symbols of identity become tools of mobilization and differentiation, and also objects of attack.

In planning their attacks, it has been argued, the terrorists selected targets which symbolized American power and prosperity, and its status as "the center of the world; both in the literal and the symbolic sense of the

²⁴ Ibid., 48.

²⁵ Laqueur, No end to war, 210-212.

²⁶ Michael Vlahos, "Terror's Mask: Insurgency within Islam," Occasional Paper, Joint Warfare Analysis Department, Applied Physics Laboratory, John Hopkins University, May 2002.

²⁷ Joseph Ghougassian, "Public diplomacy in the Middle East," *The American Thinker*, 11 May 2005, http://www.americanthinker.com/articles.php?article_id=4485.

²⁸ Kaplan, "Hearts, Minds, and Dollars."

word."²⁹ The infernal spectacle of September 11 has also, in virtue of its symbolic targets, "hit some of the deepest chords in our minds and souls" and "mobilized in our subconscious atavistic fears or archetypal, mythic, symbolic energies and the explosion of these energies may have amplified the shock to terrifying proportions."³⁰ In its targeted attack on civilians in the heart of America, it also united Americans and people in the West generally, in a feeling of collective insecurity and a heightened sense of common identity that appeared to be threatened by dark forces of irrationality and barbarism from beyond.

The confrontation was rich in symbolism from the other side as well, starting with the equally deeply felt sense of threat to identity and cherished symbols from the dangerous proximity of foreign troops to the Muslim holy places, not to mention the ongoing contest over "sacred" territory, history, and holy sites in Palestine and Arabia. While the perpetrators were most probably not fully aware of the complex "web of significance" within which their acts resonated in the West, they certainly intended them to resonate fully in the Muslim context and to provoke America into actions that will further alienate Muslims. The rhetoric they used in their communiqués and video messages tried to evoke multiple and deeply felt grievances against U.S. policies and the West as a whole, and to project a sense of threatened identity that demanded a titanic struggle to safeguard it against a malicious alien threat. The competing narratives from which the diverging perspectives flow also became a focus of polarization and a barrier to communication.³¹

Whether the rhetoric of the terrorists successfully resonated with the wider Muslim audience as some analysts argue is a matter to which we shall return.³²

What needs to be highlighted at this point is that the two sides to this conflict have conflicting objectives and interests with regards to this "war of symbols." While U.S. leaders feel obliged to defer to the deep feelings the events evoked and also to exploit their symbolic significance to mobilize political support for particular policy initiatives, they cannot afford to allow this symbolic war to escalate into a "clash of civilizations" in which whole communities are designated permanent enemies. The terrorists, by contrast, desire to achieve this clash, as can be seen from their rhetoric of justification of their acts, or from bin Laden and Zawahiri echoing Bush in dividing the world into "two camps of belief and unbelief."33 Unfortunately, given the inevitable rhetorical escalation demanded by the "war on terror," U.S. officials may have inadvertently been helping the terrorists in this objective.

A CREDIBILITY PROBLEM

A significant distinction between war propaganda and peace time public diplomacy conducted by a democratic state lies in the transparency associated with democratic processes, which enables public diplomacy to operate more effectively in times of peace. Interestingly, however, the very residual transparency of the current debate can create additional difficulties. As Muslim audiences, already deeply suspicious of American motives, follow the debate through the media, and observe U.S. officials openly debating strategies to "influence" them through tailored media messages and "reform" initiatives, they become defensive and hostile to whatever message is being beamed their way. This negative reaction, reflected in the storm of critical press editorials and op-ed articles across the Muslim world, was partly responsible for the failure of the "shared values" media campaign conducted in late

²⁹ Elemer Hankiss, "Symbols of Destruction," in after sept. 11, Social Science Research Council, http://www.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/hankiss.htm.

³⁰ Ibid

³¹ Marc Howard Ross, "The Political Psychology of Competing Narratives: September 11 and Beyond," in *Understanding September 11*, Craig Calhoun et. al. (New York, The New Press, 2002); Rajeev Bhargava, "Ordinary Feelings, Extraordinary Events: Moral Complexity in 9/11," in *Understanding September 11*, Craig Calhoun et. al. (New York, The New Press, 2002).

³² Vlahos, "Terror's Mask."

³³ Quintan Wiktorowicz and John Kaltner, "Killing in the Name of Islam: Al-Qa'ida's Justification for September 11," *Middle East Policy Journal* 10, no. 2 (Summer 2003), http://www.mepc.org/public_asp/journal_vol10/0306_wiktorowiczkaltner.asp.

2002,³⁴ and explains the lukewarm reception for Al Hurra satellite television channel and other U.S. media initiatives targeting the Arab world.³⁵

The dominant impression among Arab audiences is generally one of skepticism, regarding al-Hurra as a "propaganda tool" designed to conceal more than it reveals about American policy. Given the dominance of credible, "authentic," readily available and ubiquitous U.S. media output, why watch what is effectively at best a sanitized "young viewers" channel, or at worst an organ for naked propaganda? Surveys and studies continue to indicate a mixed, but largely negative reception among the masses,36 while the reaction among the elite is more decidedly hostile. In a typical op-ed piece in one of the most pro-U.S. newspapers owned by Saudis, a commentator ascribed the continuing Arab dissatisfaction with al-Hurra to its professional inadequacy, its failure to project a distinct identity and the uphill task it faces in the attempt to deliver its message to skeptical and hostile Arab audiences.37 The commentator reveals that she rarely watches al-Hurra in search of information even for news on events such as the tsunami disaster, and only stops when flicking across channels out of curiosity "in order to mischievously see in which trap al-Hurra will fall when covering a certain event."38

This might explain the conviction of many that "America's public diplomacy problems in the Middle East can be summed up in a single word: credibility." ³⁹ As the 9/11 Commission reminded us, this also impacts even positive messages and initiatives, such as the effort to promote reform, freedom, democracy, and opportunity in the region, since "our own promo-

tion of these messages is limited in its effectiveness simply because we are its carriers."40

Both the Djerejian and DSB Task Force reports also highlight the problem of lack of credibility, which is seen as both the product of certain policies, such as the war in Iraq, and a hindrance to effective policy implementation.

Thus the critical problem in American public diplomacy directed toward the Muslim World is not one of "dissemination of information," or even one of crafting and delivering the "right" message. Rather, it is a fundamental problem of credibility. Simply, there is none—the United States today is without a working channel of communication to the world of Muslims and of Islam. Inevitably therefore, whatever Americans do and say only serves the party that has both the message and the "loud and clear" channel: the enemy.⁴¹

This credibility problem is seen by many as a result of the fact that U.S. policy not only failed to promote American values in the Middle East, but has in fact repeatedly acted in contravention of these values, especially in the area of democracy promotion. Even when the United States preached the values of freedom (which was not very often) it tended not to practice what it preached. As one commentator summed it up:

Over two generations we have acquired a welldeserved reputation for saying one thing and doing another. We preach the virtues of democracy while supporting tyrants. We proclaim our

³⁴ Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, "Changing Minds, Winning Peace," 71-74.

³⁵ On a recent visit to Amman, I asked a young Jordanian whether he listened to Radio Sawa. "I used to," he answered, "but not any more. It has become boring." Then he added. "I occasionally listen to the news." Then after a brief period of silence, he said, "They lie beautifully."

³⁶ Summer Said, "Alhurra on the Cairo Street," Transnational Broadcasting Studies 14 (Spring 2005).

³⁷ Diana Maqlad, "Qanat Al Hurra: Ma'zq Mihni Awwalan." (Al Hurra Channel: A Professional Predicament in the First Place) Asharq Al-Awsat, 30 April 2005.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Gordon Robinson, "Egypt's Public Diplomacy Test for Washington." USC Center on Public Diplomacy, 11 February 2005, http://uscpublicdiplomacy.com/index.php/newsroom/memp_detail/egypts_public_diplomacy_test_for_washington.

⁴⁰ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "The 9/11 Commission Report," 37.

⁴¹ Defense Science Board, Report of Task Force on Strategic Communication, 41.

openness and freedom even as we make the U.S. an ever-more-difficult place to visit... Washington has long portrayed itself as an honest broker in Arab-Israeli peace talks, but as the recent memoirs of long-time Mideast envoy Dennis Ross show Washington usually cleared American proposals and ideas with the Israelis in private before 'presenting' those ideas to 'both' sides.⁴²

While this is indeed a central factor in the credibility gap, the origin of the crisis is more complex. Anti-Americanism in the region has a complex history, part of it being a hang-up from the anti-colonial struggles that bred hostility to the West in general. But the real rise in anti-Americanism was due to the resurgence of nationalism and the long-standing hegemony of leftleaning elites and their "anti-imperialist" rhetoric. There were also additional local and regional factors. For example, in Iran the hegemony of leftist movements and rhetoric combined with nationalist resentment against the very visible American presence to intensify and broaden the appeal of anti-Americanism. In the Arab world, America's increased alignment with Israel and hostility to nationalist regimes combined with the leftist ascendancy contributed to a steady rise in anti-Americanism. By the late 1980's, anti-Americanism has become so entrenched even in traditionally pro-American nations, such as Pakistan. In February 1989, Pakistani demonstrators protesting against the publication of British author Salman Rushdie's controversial novel, The Satanic Verses, decided to attack the American Culture Center (ironically the flagship of U.S. public diplomacy) rather than a British target.

In the early 1990's, anti-Western and anti-American attitudes in the Muslim world began to evolve into a mass phenomenon. The latter shift was due, ironically, to the fact that the traditionalist and Islamist forces, which were often instinctively pro-Western, have jumped ship. The traditionalists and Islamists, who

have been put on the defensive by the rising tide of secular nationalist radicalism, were anti-communist and deeply hostile to the radical secular nationalism of their dominant rivals. As a consequence, they saw in the democratic west a natural ally. A series of developments, starting with the Arab defeat in the June 1967 war with Israel and culminating in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, decimated the radical secular forces, while parallel developments, starting with the Arab Israeli war of 1973, contributed to the Islamist ascendancy. This ascendancy accelerated, and began to take a markedly anti-western flavor, with the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, the Palestinian intifada which broke out in 1987 and the second Gulf war of 1990-1991. The tide was slowed down somewhat because of the Shi'ite-Sunni rivalry. Sunni audiences were not readily receptive to the Shi'ite Iranian promotion of anti-Americanism, and in fact the Saudis tried to mobilize the Sunni world behind their pro-Western stance. This was greatly helped by both the United States and the Sunni Muslim world being on the same side in the war in Afghanistan. However, with the war over Kuwait in 1990, the grand pro-Western Sunni coalition began to crumble.

Since the remnants of the secular radical forces still maintained their traditional anti-Americanism, the defection of the Islamists turned the trend into a virtual deluge in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf war, especially given the anger at U.S. troops presence near the Muslim holy sites in Saudi Arabia. With the anger at the sanctions against Iraq, sympathy with the second Palestinian intifada of 2000 and the backlash against the war on terror and the Iraqi invasion of 2003, it would appear that nothing could stem this tide. The impact of these events was magnified by the advent of the international mass media revolution, which through satellite television and the Internet enabled mass awareness of these events, but engendered frustration among Muslims due to their inability to influence them. Brutal scenes from the intifada and graphic portrayal of Iraqi suffering were beamed

⁴² Robinson, "Egypt's Public Diplomacy Test for Washington," USC Center on Public Diplomacy.

into living rooms across the region daily, feeding a growing outrage combined with a sense of helplessness and despair. Given the local political structures that permitted little organized civic action to tackle these crises, the anger had to find a vent somewhere.

DIALOGUE AS WAR

The current attempts to engage the Arab and Muslim publics do not appear to take into account this complex history that would help to avoid such errors as the simplistic association between Islamism and anti-Americanism. The presumed link between extremist or radical "Islamism" and terrorism, to which we will return, is based on a specific understanding of Islamism as an ideology and a political phenomenon. A recent study attempted a definition of Islamism as "synonymous with "Islamic activism," the active assertion and promotion of beliefs, prescriptions, laws, or policies that are held to be Islamic in character."43 This definition, like any other, runs into a problem, since it is the very "Islamic character" of this or that policy which is the object of contest. What constitutes an Islamist group continues to be a contested issue, since many groups which appropriate the label are denied recognition as such, while many that disavow it (for example, the Justice and Development party in Turkey) are saddled with it nevertheless.44 Nevertheless, it is not difficult to identify Islamist groups, since even the opponents of these groups usually acknowledge their claims, but often additionally label them as "fundamentalist" or "extremist." The term is generally used to "refer to those groups that are active in the political arena and call for the application of Islamic values and laws in the private and public sphere."45 The label embraces groups over a

wide spectrum of views and positions, from the virtually secular Justice and Development party, the current ruling party in Turkey, to the extremely traditionalist and dogmatic Taliban in Afghanistan. This makes any discussion of Islamist politics a complex task, which can, however, be facilitated by distinguishing these groups from their secular rivals by their determination to reverse or at least slow down the *de facto* secularization of most modern Muslim societies by promoting a process of "religious revival."

The problems of the current approach are further exacerbated by the prominence given to the defense and intelligence establishments in the area of public communication, treating it as a war mission. The metaphor of the "war of ideas" was first publicized by spokespersons for defense and national security, such as Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, as an extension of the "war on terror." Most official recommendations call for the effort to be coordinated from the National Security Council. A recent investigation reveals that the CIA is the core agency fronting the new Muslim World Outreach campaign.46 Winning hearts and minds, however, cannot be an act of war. Rather it is, and can only be, a process of peaceful engagement. As a process of dialogue, it involves giving and taking and, more importantly, presumptions of mutual respect. Many analysts dismiss as unrealistic the Habermasian "ideal speech" situation where un-coerced communication prevails, and where only the better argument wins. However, the "ideal speech situation" posited by Habermas is ultimately a logical requirement. When dialogue starts from conditions of inequality, it inevitably leads to "the establishment of hegemonic or repressive forms of discourse, rather than consensual agreement."47 Interaction only deserves to be termed as

⁴³ International Crisis Group, "Understanding Islamism," 2 March 2005, http://www.crisisgroup.org/library/documents/middle_east___north_africa/egypt_north_africa/37_understanding_islamism.pdf.

⁴⁴ Abdelwahab El-Affendi, "Islamic Movements: Establishment, Significance and Contextual Realities," in *Islamic Movements: Impact on Political Stability in the Arab World*, Abdelwahab El-Affendi et. al. (Abu Dhabi: The Emirates Centre for Strategic Studies and Research, 2002). Abdelwahab El-Affendi, "Islamism and Democracy," in Understanding Democratic Politics: Concepts, Institutions Movements, ed. Roland Axtmann (London: Sage Publications, 2003).

⁴⁵ El-Affendi, "Islamic Movements," in Islamic Movements: Impact on Political Stability in the Arab World, Abdelwahab El-Affendi et. al., 7.

⁴⁶ Kaplan, "Hearts, Minds, and Dollars," U.S. News & World Report.

⁴⁷ Leonard Binder, Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 6.

dialogue when coercion is not the determinant feature of the exchange.

Additionally, treating the process as one of "public diplomacy" seeking to promote acceptance for policies that are in themselves non-negotiable⁴⁸ accentuates the "monologue" aspect of this process. It becomes a one way exchange where America talks and the rest of the world is expected to listen. The premise here is President Bush's remark in his October 11, 2001 press conference: "I know how good we are, and we've got to do a better job of making our case." This sounds like a caricature which sums all that is wrong with America's perception of itself and the world.

Further problems arise if we accept assumptions that American unpopularity is a fact of life that has to be accepted, since no imperial power can be popular (a position which also takes for granted that America is already an "empire"). International relations, one commentator argues, "is not a popularity contest" as powerful countries have always been feared, resented, and envied, but never loved.⁴⁹

Big powers have been respected and feared but not loved for good reasons—even if benevolent, tactful, and on their best behavior, they were threatening simply because of their very existence.⁵⁰

The challenge is thus to follow Machiavelli's advice of ensuring that the United States is feared and respected, full stop. According to at least one critic, this is precisely what the current administration has embarked upon. What others may see as public relations disasters (including the scandals of Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq and the revelations about maltreatment of detainees at Guantanamo Bay) are deliberate attempts

at "instilling fear of the United States among foreign populations—particularly in the Middle East" and to show them that the United States was "ready to do anything to prevail in a world it sees as infiltrated by America's mortal enemies."⁵¹

If we add here the fact that the lead in efforts to engage Arab and Muslim publics is not being taken by the more liberal segments of the U.S. elite, who are traditionally more sensitive to non-American perspectives and more inclined towards dialogue, we end up with a recipe for a hostile encounter. The proponents of the "war of ideas" approach often openly express indifference to what others think of America. As one typical voice from the neoconservative camp put it, "If Andrew Kohut or John Zogby tells me that that the bottom has fallen out of support for America in the Muslim world, I don't jump out of the window, because I actually really don't care. I mean, I really don't care." This, he explains, is not America's problem.

There are two schools of thought about the famous question: "Why do they hate us?" One school of thought says: "They hate us—what's wrong with us?" The second school says "They hate us—what's wrong with them?" Ladies and gentlemen, I belong firmly to the second school of thought. I don't want to spend an enormous amount of time talking about why exactly they hate us and what's wrong with us.⁵³

Some argue what is wrong with Muslims and most Europeans is their envy of America. There is, on top of that, a problem with sections of the American elite as well. The surveys that indicate America's unpopularity were, these critics argue, "really just a way for a segment of the American elite to talk about America and put it

⁴⁸ Robert Satloff, The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror: Essays on U.S. Public Diplomacy in the Middle East (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2004).

⁴⁹ Walter Laqueur, "The Terrorism to Come," *Policy Review*, no. 126 (August September, 2004), http://www.policyreview.org/aug04/laqueur.html>.

⁵¹ John Brown, "Fear As Foreign Policy," TomPaine.com, 14 June 2005 http://www.tompaine.com/articles/20050614/fear_as_foreign_policy.php.

⁵² Fouad Ajami and Robert Satloff, "How to Win the Battle of Ideas in the Middle East," 10 November 2004, (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy) https://washingtoninstitute.org/templateC07.php?CID=151.

⁵³ Ibid.

in the words of foreigners." ⁵⁴ This could mean that the war of ideas starts at home. It is not only a war against Islamism, but also against those views and trends in the United States and Europe which do not see the war on terrorism in the same Manichean prism. This could have dangerous implications for American democracy, since it could be used to intimidate and silence critics of the ongoing campaign, some commentators fear. ⁵⁵

The neoconservative assumptions behind this stance could also cloud judgment and inhibit dialogue, as Francis Fukuyama has recently argued in an exchange with fellow neoconservative Charles Krauthammer. In this view, the uncharacteristically revolutionary shift in neoconservative thinking, as exhibited in the continuing advocacy of the war in Iraq in spite of clear indications that it had been a colossal mistake, points to a dangerous lack of realism. The related exaggeration of minor threats and dogmatic militarism has undermined the U.S. ability to win friends and court allies, not only in the Muslim world, but in Europe and elsewhere as well.⁵⁶

The neoconservative approach attempts to resolve the anomaly of this "dialogue as war" by following the 9/11 Commission in making a distinction between hard-core anti-Americans, who should only be defeated, and the rest who could be wooed. The enemy can thus be seen as a "relatively small but still sizable, intensely ambitious, and disproportionately powerful subgroup of Muslims [who] do indeed hate 'who we are." The rest include those alienated by U.S. policies, as well as a majority who are too preoccupied with survival to care. While many agree that the fight against Islamism is a fight for Muslims, most see it as one in which America should come down heavily on the anti-Islamist side.

Most of these assumptions are, needless to point out, open to question. Not all "empires" are resented equally. There has always been a marked difference between the reaction of the subjects of the Soviet and American "empires," just as there was a difference in viewing the Romans and the Mongols. If the United States has a problem in the Middle East, it is precisely because it has been accused of adopting "Soviet-style" conduct there, (an accusation highlighted by Amnesty International's likening of the Guantanamo Bay detention center to the Soviet "Gulag.") 58

DIALOGUE ON ISLAM AND TERROR

The success of the campaign of public diplomacy will greatly depend on perceptions of whom one is talking to and what one is talking about, not to mention the reason why this dialogue was seen as necessary in the first place. The last point is easy to determine, since this whole process appears to have been motivated by concerns about how to combat terrorism.

A note of caution was sounded in this context by the 9/11 Commission by pointing out how misleading it could be to discuss terrorism as "some generic evil," and by reminding us that the "war" in the war on terror only describes part of the endeavor. One could add that speaking of terrorism as a generic phenomenon rather than just one style of waging war could lead to confusion. Terrorism and every other type of asymmetric warfare are likely to persist—and metamorphose with time and circumstance—in an age where conventional war is fast becoming obsolete. The most important step in containing and neutralizing terrorism, as the Commission points, is thus the preventive approach that seeks to eliminate or reduce support for potential terrorists.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Richard Rorty. "Fighting Terrorism with Democracy," The Nation, 21 October 2002.

⁵⁶ Francis Fukuyama, "The Neoconservative Moment," *The National Interest* (Summer 2004); Charles Krauthammer, "Democratic Realism: An American Foreign Policy for a Unipolar World," 10 February 2004 (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute), https://www.aei.org/publications/filter.all/default.asp; Charles Krauthammer, "In Defense of Democratic Realism," *The National Interest* (Fall 2004).

⁵⁷ Satloff, The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror.

⁵⁸ Amnesty International, "Annual Report," May 2005.

⁵⁹ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "The 9/11 Commission Report," 362-3.

⁶⁰ Laqueur, No end to war, 210.

There are two broad views about the nature of the present terrorist threat and how to tackle it. According to one vision, we are dealing here with a new kind of fanatical or "apocalyptic" terrorism, 61 focused enough in its purpose and diffuse enough in its demands so as to ensure that nothing we can do would appease the terrorists. What needs to be done is to fight them resolutely, mainly through improved intelligence, and hope and pray for the "phenomenon known in Egypt as 'Salafi burnout,' the mellowing of radical young people and the weakening of the original fanatical impetus." According to the second view, one has to emphasize the political character and motives of the terrorists.

To adapt Karl von Clausewitz, terrorism is the continuation of politics by other means. The footsoldiers and suicide-bombers of the current campaign may well be fanatics, but the people who direct them have a political strategy. And their vision stretches over years if not decades.⁶³

The first view, which regards the new terrorist groups as essentially absolutist and "anti-modern," even if they tend to pursue "a modern agenda with anti-modern symbols," ⁶⁴ appears to be the dominant one at present. It is to some extent the view espoused by the 9/11 Commission, which concluded that Islamism was the main motive behind the rise of al-Qa'ida, accounting for its inflexibility and its absolutist agenda. The Commission's report recognizes the complex motives and inspirations of al-Qa'ida, pointing out that bin Laden's rhetoric

selectively draws from multiple sources—Islam, history, and the region's political and economic

malaise. He also stresses grievances against the United States widely shared in the Muslim world. He inveighed against the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia, the home of Islam's holiest sites. He spoke of the suffering of the Iraqi people as a result of sanctions imposed after the Gulf War, and he protested U.S. support of Israel. 65

But the report singles out in particular that "extreme Islamist version of history [which] blames the decline from Islam's golden age on the rulers and people who turned away from the true path of their religion, thereby leaving Islam vulnerable to encroaching foreign powers eager to steal their land, wealth, and even their souls." The inspiration for this vision comes from the leading Egyptian Islamist ideologue, Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966) and the fiery medieval Muslim religious thinker, Ibn Taymiyyah (1263-1328), both of whom preached an uncompromising vision which saw no middle ground in what they "conceived as a struggle between God and Satan."66 The stance of these insurgents is thus "not a position with which Americans can bargain or negotiate. With it there is no common ground—not even respect for life—on which to begin a dialogue. It can only be destroyed or utterly isolated."67

Nevertheless, dialogue is urgently needed with the wider Muslim community based on a clear definition and defense of American values (and, more importantly, living up to them). This would entail fighting tyranny and promoting democracy and development in Muslim regions. A similar prescription is offered by the DSB Task Force, which calls for a broad communication strategy targeting the undecided majority

⁶¹ John Keane, Violence and Democracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

⁶² Laqueur, "The Terrorism to Come," *Policy Review*.

⁶³ Fred Halliday, "Terrorism and world politics: conditions and prospects," openDemocracy.net, 18 January 2005 http://opendemocracy.net/content/articles/PDF/2309.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Mary Kaldor, Global Civil Society: An Answer to War (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003).

⁶⁵ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "The 9/11 Commission Report," 48-49.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 50-51.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 362.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 375-377.

as well as attempting to firm up "soft support." Djerejian also argues that it would be at least possible to "dampen the animosity" among the Arab masses through public diplomacy. 70

If one adopts the view that the emergent "fanatical" terrorism is the direct consequence of adherence to certain unshakable religious beliefs, then it would make little sense to try to influence this segment through strategic communication. Religious terrorism, it has been prophetically argued by some leading specialists even before the September 11 catastrophe, differed from its secular counterpart in that violence is here perceived as "a sacramental act or divine duty executed in direct response to some theological demand or imperative." It legitimizes and even encourages "indiscriminate killing on a massive scale," against religiously defined enemies. Religiously motivated terrorists also "seek to appeal to no other constituency than themselves," with the consequence that "the restraints on violence that are imposed on secular terrorists by the desire to appeal to a tacitly supportive or uncommitted constituency are not relevant" to them.71 One can thus expect religiously motivated terrorists to seek to acquire weapons of mass destruction and plan massive indiscriminate killing, since the "main obstacles facing them are practical rather than theological."72

While all terrorists are by nature fanatical, religious fanaticism is usually more intense and less amenable to reasoning and argument than other varieties. On the other hand, violence that is motivated purely by religious considerations is very rare if it exists at all. Apart from such now extinct manifestations as the Kali cult which demanded human sacrifice for the

Hindu goddess, and some millenarian fringe cults such as the Aum Shinrikyo sect in Japan, it is hard to find violence that is purely motivated by religious beliefs which are not combined with explicit political motives. In many cases which look like purely religious acts of violence (such as the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque by Hindu extremists in India in 1992) "the motivation was not so much religious as nationalist."⁷³ The same could be said about Jewish, Palestinian, Chechen or Kashmiri violence. Religion here is not the primary motive as much as it is a weapon and instrument for mobilization.

In some specific cases where religious sectarian motives began to dominate among terrorist groups, as was the case in Armed Islamic Group in Algeria, or the "Zarqawi" group in Iraq, such groups tended to self-destruct through intense political infighting provoked by inherent ideological rigidity. This is, incidentally, the same way the first Muslim extremist group, the *Khawarij* (rebels)⁷⁴ collapsed after breaking into myriad infighting sects.

If we try to apply these criteria to al-Qa'ida, we will find that while the terrorist group is making ample use of religious language, it appears to have identifiable political objectives that make it very selective in its targets. Also far from being inward looking and treating violence as a "sacramental act," it seems to be obsessed with communication and seeks to appeal to wide audiences, including audiences within Europe and the United States. Long before he embarked on his terror campaign, bin Laden made a point of inviting leading U.S. media organizations—including ABC News and CNN—to his Afghan hideout to deliver a message to the American public.⁷⁵ He still

⁶⁹ Defense Science Board, Report of Task Force on Strategic Communication, 54-56.

⁷⁰ Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, "Changing Minds, Winning Peace," 17.

⁷¹ Bruce Hoffman, Inside Terrorism (London: Victor Gollancz, 1998), 94-95.

⁷² Walter Laqueur, The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 238-9.

⁷³ Ibid., 238.

⁷⁴ The *khawarij* were a group of insurgents who rejected both camps in the first major Muslim civil conflict in the first century of the Muslim calendar, and continued to battle authority for centuries afterwards. With the exception of one relatively moderate faction, which is the dominant sect in today's Oman, the other factions died out in the unrelenting battles they launched against each other and the rest of the community.

⁷⁵ CNN's Peter Arnett interviewed him in eastern Afghanistan in March 1997, John Miller of ABC followed in May 1998 and *Time* magazine interviewed him in January 1999. All these encounters were arranged by bin Laden himself and at his request.

continues to exploit the media to deliver regular messages to international audiences, and even made a bid to influence the outcome of the last American election by an expertly timed broadcast in which he ridiculed President Bush's sluggish response to the 9/11 attacks.

Far from being rigid, al-Qa'ida and its affiliates have shown remarkable adaptability, as empirical research by Jessica Stern and others has revealed. According to Stern, such groups acquire a remarkable flexibility as they turn into "professional" terrorist outfits. Adherents first "join such groups to make the world a better place—at least for the particular populations they aim to serve."

Over time, however, militants have told me, terrorism can become a career as much as a passion. Leaders harness humiliation and anomie and turn them into weapons. Jihad becomes addictive, militants report, and with some individuals or groups — the "professional" terrorists — grievances can evolve into greed: for money, political power, status, or attention.

In such "professional" terrorist groups, simply perpetuating their cadres becomes a central goal, and what started out as a moral crusade becomes a sophisticated organization. Ensuring the survival of the group demands flexibility in many areas, but especially in terms of mission. Objectives thus evolve in a variety of ways.⁷⁶

TERRORISM, THE MASSES AND THE STATE

While al-Qa'ida's attempts to influence western audiences have not been a resounding success, Arab opinion has shown less resistance. The rise in anti-Americanism has also coincided with a rise in approval of violent groups in the Middle East,

whether religious or secular, as revealed in a recent survey conducted by the Jordanian Center for Strategic Studies. The survey sounded the opinions of people in five countries—Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt—about various issues relating to terrorism. On average around 90 percent of respondents (but only around 66 percent in Lebanon) labeled the 3 Palestinian movements—Islamic Jihad, Hamas and al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades—and the Lebanese Hizballah as "legitimate resistance organizations."77 By contrast, the proportion of those who regarded al-Qa'ida as a legitimate resistance movement was significantly smaller (8 percent in Syria, 18 percent in Lebanon and 41 percent in Egypt). Less than a quarter of respondents (in contrast to 33 percent in Egypt and 54 percent in Lebanon) regarded attacks against Israeli civilians as acts of terrorism. However, the September 11 attacks were regarded as a terrorist act by 73 percent in Lebanon, 71 percent in Syria, 62 percent in Egypt, but only 35 percent in Jordan and 22 percent in Palestine.78

These figures are extremely significant for many reasons. First, they tend to indicate that it is politics, rather than ideology or religion, which is the determinant factor in shaping attitudes. There were some variations in the responses according to religious or social status. For example, an average 98 percent of Lebanese Muslims regarded the Palestinian and Lebanese groups as legitimate resistance movements, compared to an average of 55 percent for Lebanese Christians (74 percent in the case of Hizballah) who agreed to this proposition. However, national variations appear to be more significant overall, with additional variations relating to education and occupation. For example, disapproval of attacks on civilians was slightly higher than the national average among college students, businessmen and media professionals (with the exception of Palestinian students, where disapproval was sharply lower).

⁷⁶ Jessica Stern, "The Protean Enemy," Foreign Affairs (July-August, 2003).

⁷⁷ Fares A. Braizat, "What counts as terrorism? The view on the Arab street," openDemocracy.net, 6 January 2005 < http://opendemocracy.net/conflict-terrorism/article_2298.jsp>.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

The results could also be interpreted as indicating that the terrorists are way ahead in the "war of ideas," but only because, as Stern and others have revealed, they have proved flexible and responsive to change, and not as dogmatic and fanatical as they were supposed to be.⁷⁹ For example, Hizballah has evolved significantly from its early beginnings when it broke away from the relatively moderate and secular Amal Shi'ite militia in the 1980's. Today, the party appears completely reconciled to the Lebanese secular system, and is equally admired by secular and religious nationalists, including many Christians. This is also due to significant local and regional political developments. Ten or fifteen years ago, few Lebanese Christians would have voiced approval of Hizballah, preferring to support their own Christian militias instead. However, in the last decade or so, the Lebanese political scene has witnessed important political re-alignments, and Lebanese nationalism redefined itself along new lines, with Hizballah and its role at the heart of this redefined nationalism. This has a lot to do with Hizballah's perceived success in forcing the Israelis out of Lebanon, a feat which became a source of pride for all Lebanese, as well as with the new more "moderate" image which the party tries to cultivate, taking great care not to alienate its former rivals or enemies. A lot also has to do with the Syrian role in Lebanon, which means that Hizballah will need considerable political skills if it is not to pay a heavy price for the current debacle Syria has faced in Lebanon.

The latter point brings us to the central factor in the resurgence of violent groups in the Middle East: namely, the failure and retreat of the state. Hizballah had in fact become the "military wing" of the Lebanese state, which in turn had been a client of Syria. Following the political and military failure of Arab states to stand up to Israel, the regimes faced both popular pressure to permit non-state groups to get involved in the military effort, and a temptation to exploit such fervor. Political groups started to compete

since the late 1940's in sending volunteers to Palestine (and in the case of Egypt, to initiate guerrilla operations against British troops in the Suez Canal Zone), while states had to acquiesce in (or even encourage) the formation of Palestinian guerrilla groups from the late 1950's. Soon these groups became policy tools in the hands of rival governments (and a policy problem for others).

The Hizballah-Syria partnership is one rare success story in this saga, where "plausible deniability" of any state role in its operations was facilitated by the status of the weakened and divided Lebanese state. While the party started as a fervently ideological and intensely sectarian organization, taking inspiration and active support from Iran, it has slowly metamorphosed into an essentially Lebanese (and to a lesser extent Arab) phenomenon. The party has found for itself a distinctive niche in Lebanese and regional politics and tried to fit perfectly into it.

It can thus be argued that, given the political and ethical vacuum created by the virtual abdication of the Arab state, and the deeply polarized politics of the Middle East, there is a role for non-state purveyors of violence in search of actors to fill, and various groups have been competing to fill it. Ideology is important here, but only as a secondary and supportive factor. It is no accident that Islamic groups (Hamas, Hizballah, etc.) have recently managed to outbid their secular rivals in this competition. This has partly been facilitated by a martyrdom ideology and the fervor of adherents to such groups. However, as splits within these groups indicate (Hamas vs. Islamic Jihad in Palestine, Islamic Group vs. Islamic Jihad in Egypt, Amal vs. Hizballah in Lebanon and the various competing groups in Algeria) ideology is not sufficient to determine direction or guarantee success. A determinant factor appears to be the emergence of an enterprising and competent leadership that succeeds in exploiting existing "business opportunities" most effectively.

⁷⁹ Jessica Stern, "The Protean Enemy," Foreign Affairs (July-August, 2003); Michael Doran, "The pragmatic fanaticism of al Qa'ida: an anatomy of extremism in Middle Eastern politics," Political Science Quarterly 117, no. 2 (July 2002).

The above cited popularity of violent groups and acts can be seen as a reflection of such successful political entrepreneurship. It also explains the unique feature of violent activism in the Middle East (and to some extent Pakistan), where terrorist groups exist in full public view and often act ostentatiously in what could only be described as publicity stunts, often to the detriment of any military value their operations may have. Pushing the "propaganda by deed" dimension of terrorism to absurd proportions, secular and Islamic groups compete fiercely to win popularity by often claiming the same operation, and immediately releasing the names and affiliation of the perpetrators, thus emphasizing the fact that these operations are predominantly some form of a "public relations" exercise. This is an indication that the problem is not restricted to terrorist groups, which are neither isolated nor the object of widespread condemnation.

This has prompted many to argue that it might be a mistake to speak of a "war against terrorism," since what we appear to be facing here is rather an "insurgency within Islam." It is, moreover, a "civilizational insurgency" to be compared with such broad historic movements as the Protestant Reformation or socialism, relying mainly on "cultural subversion" in their struggle.80

The terrorist network is a ring of military subcultures that represents a much larger political movement within Islam, one that is nothing less than a civilization-wide insurgency against the established regimes of Sunni Islam. The "terrorists" are merely the fighters in this jihad. Millions of sympathizers and supporters play active, even critical roles in the movement.81

It might even be unhelpful to designate this as a "terrorist network," as though "it were a cartel of criminal gangs," a label which "satisfies our own needs but... does nothing to advance our understanding" of the phenomenon.82 Far from being fringe or "criminal" groups, the "Islamists we dislike have more authority than the 'moderate' or 'liberal' Muslims we like."83

This analytical stance is not as daft as it seems, but it does not lend credence to the derivative position linking this "insurgency" to the religious imperative and to Islamism in the way many authors (e.g., Pipes, Bar, etc.) seem to argue. This can be seen from Vlahos' own text, where we are told that the insurgency "moves within the legitimate Islamic tradition" and enjoys "great informal authority" in spite of being denied legal standing,84 but where we are also reminded that the groups involved base themselves on a "limited conception of Islam" and "ignore true Islamic tradition."85 In addition, the movements justify themselves by appealing to the perception that "these are times of crisis for Islam," and invoke dispensations permitting them to act "outside the strict orbit of rules and laws he laid down for the normal believer in normal times."86

Modern radical Islamism is in fact defined by the distance it keeps between itself and historical Islam and by its "modern" rejection of tradition, hostility to what it terms "superstition" and its aversion to "higher spirituality."87 Its very militancy and resorting to violence betrays its desperation and lack of deep roots within the wider community, which it constantly chastizes for failure to live up to its own conception of true Islam. However, this does not entirely justify the other extreme allegation that this radicalism is "a western invention" and the product of "the worst of

⁸⁰ Vlahos, "Terror's Mask."

⁸¹ Ibid., 1.

⁸² Ibid., 7.

⁸³ Ibid., 20.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 10, 12.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁷ Abdal-Hakim Murad, "Bombing without Moonlight: The Origins of Suicidal Terrorism," Islamica, no. 12 (Spring 2005), 75.

Enlightenment possibilities." Islamism is the product of modernization, since it represents the attempt to adapt religious mores to the demand of modernity and salvage all that can be saved from the religious tradition. But this does not make it a "western invention."

TERROR AND THE ISLAMIST QUESTION

The truth, as usual, lies somewhere in the middle. The issue indeed has to do with an "insurgency" rather than isolated "criminal gangs." However, this insurgency is motivated by modern grievances rather than medieval theology. The decision to join violent groups is not because young people read Sayyid Qutb or his presumed medieval inspiration, Ibn Taymiyyah. It is usually the other way round: militants usually begin reading Qutb as a consequence of choosing the militant path. Ibn Taymiyyah and his modern day Saudi Wahhabi disciples, together with Qutb, have been singled out for inspiring "a furious single-minded zeal... that expressed itself in a deep pessimism about the human mind and conscience, and hence the worth of intellectuals, poets, logicians and mystics." 89

While there is a measure of truth in all this, one has to emphasize, as a start, that the direct genealogical link from Ibn Taymiyyah to Qutb is tenuous at best, and both bear no direct responsibility for the current eruption of violence. The appeal of both men to modern Muslims comes from what they jettison, rather than what they keep, of the Islamic tradition. Ibn Taymiyyah was opposed to all creativity in matters religious, while Qutb opposed creativity in matters political. In both cases, the thrust is to lighten the burden and demand less from followers. Qutb owes his uncompromising stance less to Ibn Taymiyyah than to the Pakistani thinker Sayyid Abu'l-Ala al-Mawdudi (d. 1979), who was more familiar with modern western political thought than with Ibn Taymiyyah. The title of Mawdudi's seminal 1940 lecture which signaled

his definitive break from mainstream Indian Muslim nationalism was "The Methodology of the Islamic Revolution," a concept that owed more to Marx than to any traditional Muslim source. Mawdudi's own Jamaat-e Islami was not directly engaged in any largescale political violence. And while it might be farfetched to attempt a "liberal" reading of Outb, as some have done, 90 a quietist reading is the one more consistent with his worldview. Qutb, like Mawdudi, sees any engagement in politics, let alone violence, as inappropriate before the rise of a dedicated and autonomous Muslim community. For him, the current situation resembles the phase in which the Muslims were before the Prophet migrated to Medina, a phase in which Muslims lived as a minority among the unbelievers and were ordered to desist from engaging in open conflict even if provoked, and to concentrate mainly on worship and propagating the message of Islam. If Mawdudi's followers did engage in politics, and Qutb's devotees did resort to violence, which has happened in spite of the ideology, not because of it.

A closer examination of the discourse of violent Islamic groups indicates, in fact, many attempts to reinterpret religious teachings on political grounds. For example, ideologues in these movements have been busy trying to sidestep the clear injunctions in traditional Islamic jurisprudence against suicide and against attacking civilians, either by trying to redefine terms (renaming suicide bombings "martyrdom operations" or denying the existence of civilians in Israel) or by pleading overriding necessity that makes it impossible or counterproductive to adhere to traditional teachings. This is another sign of ideological flexibility and political expediency, which most of these groups tend to show. It is also an indication that the focus of attention of these groups is the surrounding reality rather than religious texts. Whatever is agitating them is what they see on the ground, and the way they perceive and interpret reality.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 65.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Binder, Islamic Liberalism; Muqtedar Khan, "Have Iraqis Voted for a Dictatorship?" Daily Times, 13 February 2005.

Their own interpretation of Islam is often influenced by these concerns. There is no question that religion instills a zeal and determination in these activists that makes them more dangerous and enabled them to outbid their more secular rivals. However, the motivation of violent groups consists of a complex structure of ideology/worldview and reality assessment. For example, Palestinian Islamists have for decades relied on ideological justifications for inaction, arguing that it was against Islam to join secular guerrilla groups and regimes in the fight against Israel, since jihad (legitimate war)91 could only be waged by a legitimate Islamic authority. Only when a legitimate Islamic state is set up would it be appropriate to wage war. However, they were forced by shifting political conditions to review their ideology and legitimize jihad when their political survival came under threat from rival groups, and also when the regional climate became more conducive for military action. What this tells us is that no Palestinian group, regardless of ideology, can survive politically in the current climate without advocating and engaging in violence, a fact emphasized by the emergence of a militant wing of the main Palestinian group, Fatah, in spite of its leaders adherence to the Oslo accord. Similarly, the bin Laden group was convinced in its early years of the advisability of cooperating both with the U.S. and the Saudi regime in the Afghan war against the Soviets, and only gradually changed its approach, also under the pressure of the circumstances.

The proliferation and endemic nature of terrorism in the Middle East is more a function of dysfunctional states in a regional system with a moral vacuum at its center, rather than being the reflection of a certain ideology. This can be further supported by a review of patterns of terrorist action across religious

communities. Religious radicalism is not restricted to Islam, 92 so the predilection to engagement in terrorism is not the exclusive preserve of Muslims, let alone Islamist radicals.93 The leading figures in the (exclusively secular) early phase of Palestinian guerrilla warfare included a sizeable section of Marxists and Christians. In addition, Christian militiamen in Lebanon have also used terrorist tactics, as did Jewish activists in the pre-state phase in Israel, and sporadically after that.94 The relative resurgence of extremist Jewish terrorism in the post-Oslo era points to the general connection between terrorism and the erosion of the legitimacy or perceived efficacy of the state, regardless of culture or religious affiliation. This is clearly demonstrated by the extraordinary parallelism between Jewish and Muslim terrorist groups noted by many observers.95

Jewish terrorist groups preceded the rise of the state of Israel, and then receded in influence as the state took over the task of advancing Zionist goals. They made an appearance once more at a later stage at a time during which the state was perceived to have lapsed in fulfilling its duty towards Zionist ideals, especially after the signing of the Oslo accords in 1993. This sparked acts of terrorist violence by Jewish extremists, such as the massacre of Palestinian worshippers at a Hebron mosque in February 1994, or the assassination in November 1995 of Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. It is likely that if the Israeli state did not engage in its frequent "targeted killings" of suspected Palestinian terrorists, some vigilante groups would have emerged to engage in similar activities. Already, settler militias and other extremist groups have been known to engage in violence targeting Palestinians, including civilians who are not

⁹¹ The term "jihad" is difficult to pin down not only because it is a contested term, but also because it is a generic and neutral term which simply means "struggle". Only when used in a phrase (e.g. jihad fi sabil Allah = struggle in the way of God; or jihad al-Nafs = inner struggle) does it acquire a more specific meaning. However, since having been replaced in modern Arabic with the term nidal (struggle), the now archaic term tends to be used implicitly as equivalent to the phrase, "jihad fi sabil Allah".

⁹² Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, eds., Fundamentalisms Comprehended (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

⁹³ Jessica Stern, Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill (New York: HarperCollins, 2003).

⁹⁴ Hoffman, Inside Terrorism. Laqueur, The New Terrorism.

⁹⁵ Magnus Ranstorp, "Terrorism in the name of religion," Journal of International Affairs 50, no. 1 (Summer 1996).

suspected of involvement in violence, usually in reprisals, but often as acts of intimidation.⁹⁶

While religious motivation was important in inspiring Jewish terrorist groups such as Meir Kahane's Kach (set up in 1971), terrorist entrepreneurs have shown marked selectivity in dealing with religious texts and traditions. In any case, religious fanaticism cannot sustain movements on the long term, not only because a movement made up of suicidal fanatics is not going to last long, but also because all terrorist groups embark onto a path that that is ultimately self-destructive, as historical experience indicates. The "civilizational insurgency" thesis put forth by neoconservatives would thus be unsustainable unless we look beyond religious zeal for motives and incentives that continue to swell the ranks of terrorist groups.

To sum up then, it can be safely said that the United States is not in a "war on terror," much less a "war on Islam" or even a war with radical Islam. The United States is in a war with a businessman with a nationalist grudge who uses Islam to mobilize support for his cause. Had the United States sent its troops into Saudi Arabia in the 1960's to fight an Arab nationalist "threat," its enemies would have been leftist and nationalist radicals. When it did intrude marginally in the 1980's to fight the Iranians, its opponents were Shi'ite militants. Today, its opponents just happen to be Sunni radicals. The stakes, however, remain "nationalist" in the essence. bin Laden's main quarrel with the United States is over a nationalist grievance in a country where religious and national identity are closely intertwined. He turned against the United States because American troops were in his country. It is ironic that, were he to follow strict traditional Islamic doctrine,97 then the presence of American troops in any part of the land of Islam should have been an equal cause for grievance. However, bin Laden appears to have been moved to anger specifically by the presence of troops inside the Saudi borders. Even with regards to the Arab Peninsula, which he treats in his rhetoric as the sacred land of the Prophet, he appears to conveniently ignore the U.S. presence in Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait. In his interview with ABC's John Miller and other declarations, bin Laden uses the term the "Land of the Two Holy Places" as a synonym for Saudi Arabia. This shows how specifically nationalist his motivation has been, albeit unconsciously.

A successful businessman turned political entrepreneur, bin Laden is a cross between the Unabomber and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Like the former, he is a lone actor, eccentric and isolated in his hermitically sealed worldview and his band of loyal followers. His successes have to do with an acute entrepreneurial acumen that has enabled him to effectively deploy easily accessible financial resources and mobilize and recruit dependable staff for his operations. Like the PLO, he managed to turn a nationalist struggle into a worldwide struggle and enlist sympathy and support from adherents of other causes. However, while anti-Americanism in the region and worldwide might give the impression that this "insurgency" has widespread popular support, the truth remains that active support remains restricted to a relatively small fringe. As the Jordanian Center for Strategic Studies survey indicates, even where some level of (passive) support exists, it is a reflection of specific local grievances, as was the case among Palestinian students, for example.98 If the insurgency appears to have some force left in it, in particular in Iraq, this is due in large part to policy mistakes in the war in Iraq and its aftermath, where a long catalogue of errors is threatening to unravel an otherwise potentially constructive operation.

This insurgency is implacable and cannot be appeased not because its ideology is inflexible, but because it has gone past the point of no return in its war with the rest of the world. One does not mount an operation like

⁹⁶ Ranstorp, "Terrorism in the name of religion," Journal of International Affairs; Stern, Terror in the Name of God.

⁹⁷ In traditional Islamic doctrine, *dar al-Islam* (Islamic Territory) embraces all territories where Islam has become dominant, and they are subject to the same rules. The rules covering foreign troops presence on Islamic territory are the same for Uzbekistan as they are for Saudi Arabia.

⁹⁸ Braizat, "What counts as terrorism?" openDemocracy.net.

9/11 and then expect an invitation to the negotiation table at the United Nations in New York the following week. This has to be a fight to the finish, and the perpetrators knew it. Their hope was that the conflict will become so out of control that their presence would not be necessary to carry it on. The challenge is to deny them this goal.

COMING TO TERMS WITH ISLAMISM

In its anti-terror campaign, the United States has alternately been accused of waging a war against Islam,99 failing to wage such an unavoidable war 100 and even acting as a "patron of Islam." 101 The United States does face a big challenge about how to deal with Islamism, a dilemma that is at the heart of U.S. ambivalence towards democracy in the Middle East, where democratization is seen to favor Islamist parties. 102 The Clinton administration experimented with some tentative engagements with the Islamist opposition in countries such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, but was dissuaded from continuing with this course of action by howls of protest from friendly Arab regimes and critics at home. Many argued vehemently against such engagement¹⁰³ and the Bush administration became "even more wary about the inclusion of moderate Islamist groups than it was before the September 11 attacks."104 Neoconservative wisdom counsels even less engagement with Islamists. In the words of Robert Satloff of the Washington Institute,

It is far better to gamble on assisting a local partner who claims to share an antipathy to the Islamists and to fail in that effort than to cover one's bets through a counterproductive effort to reach a *modus vivendi* with the Islamists themselves. That never works, and in the process we undermine and embarrass our friends. I think we need to be very clear about this. The strategy of co-opting and of dialogue is a failed strategy.¹⁰⁵

Such counsel is based on the questionable assumption that the mere engagement in dialogue with Islamists is going to have dramatic consequences for their political fortunes. However, as is the case in Iraq and Afghanistan today (and Afghanistan in the 1980's), the question may need to be put the other way round: reliance on Islamists could at times be more indispensable for the success of American policy than the other way round.106 Where would American influence in Afghanistan be without the ardent support of mujahiddeen warlords? Or in Iraq without the support of, ironically, the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq, not to mention the Islamic Da'wa party, the organization that was a pioneer in popularizing suicide bombing? The local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood in Iraq has also been thrown into this alliance for good measure, and a key figure in all this is Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani.

This is a reflection of the fact that, by its very nature, practical policy is dictated by pragmatic considerations that do not easily yield to a simplistic Manichean division of the world into permanent absolute enemies and perennial friends. It is also another reminder that even the most radical of Islamist groups do evolve and respond pragmatically to changing circumstances. In any case, engagement with the Islamists is indispensable for successful democratization, especially in view of how difficult it has proved to sideline them, and the

⁹⁹ Faisal Bodi, "Of course it's a war on Islam," The Guardian, 17 October 2001; Abid Ullah Jan, A War on Islam? What does the "war on terror" mean for the Muslim and non-Muslim World? (London: Maktabah Al-Ansa, 2002).

¹⁰⁰ Bar, "The Religious Sources of Islamic Terrorism," Policy Review.

¹⁰¹ Daniel Pipes and Mimi Stillman, "The United States Government: Patron of Islam?" Middle East Quarterly (January 2002).

¹⁰² Tamara Coffman Wittes, "The Promise of Arab Liberalism," *Policy Review*, no. 125 (June–July 2004), < http://www.policyreview.org/jun04/wittes.html>. International Crisis Group, "The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative: Imperilled at Birth," 7 June 2004, < http://www.crisisweb.org//library/documents/middle_east___north_africa/20040607_bmei.pdf>.

¹⁰³ Judith Miller, "The Challenge of Radical Islam," Foreign Affairs (Spring 1993).

¹⁰⁴ Amy Hawthorne, Political Reform in the Arab World: A New Ferment? Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2004.

¹⁰⁵ Fouad Ajami and Robert Satloff, "How to Win the Battle of Ideas in the Middle East."

¹⁰⁶ El-Affendi, "Islamic Movements," in Islamic Movements: Impact on Political Stability in the Arab World, Abdelwahab El-Affendi et. al.

growing belief that "Islamist organizations are key to building constituencies for democracy in the Arab world today" (Ottaway, 2004: 14). The whole rationale of the current democratization drive is the realization that change is going to take place anyway. Consequently U.S. "failure to try to shape these changes would be a missed opportunity that could, if the region's governments do not meet their looming challenges successfully, threaten core U.S. strategic interests in the region for decades to come." 107 Similarly, the Islamists are not going to sit around and wait for the United States to make up its mind about how to deal with them. The Sudanese Islamists did not consult with Washington before deciding to mount their coup in June 1989, and the Iranian, Turkish and Tunisian Islamic moderates reformulated their ideology and strategies with reference to their own internal circumstances. Developments will continue to occur on the Islamist front. It is better to be present than absent when they do.

While Islamism presents a challenge to democratization, it has been argued that it is "a danger to the West but hardly a danger in the West—or China, or Latin America, or anywhere else where Islam is not already the dominant religion." This argument could be slightly modified to the assertion that Islamism is a danger *for* the West, since it is still an exaggeration to characterize it as a danger *to* the West. Even in its extreme forms, it is still not an existential threat. From the perspective of democratization, these extremist groups disrupt the normal political process through violence or threats of violence, and are also used as a pretext by incumbents to delay political reform.

The more moderate Islamist groups at present pose a problem for stability more through their inaction than through their action. More at home as a protest and advocacy movements, Islamist groups have failed to capitalize on the windfall of relative popularity which had unexpectedly come their way. But, so far they have not turned their popularity into actual political clout through appropriate political action. With the exception of Turkey (and to a lesser extent Iran), Islamists failed to evolve the necessary ideological flexibility and political acumen that would enable them to navigate successfully in a democratic setting.¹⁰⁹

Islamism or, more accurately, Islamic revivalism, is a projection of an ongoing conversation within Islamic communities about how to relate to the modern world: what aspects of tradition to keep and what to jettison in order to adapt and survive. There are those who, like Qutb and Mawdudi, would like this conversation to be a monologue. At the other end of the spectrum, are liberals and modernists who would prefer the tradition to be completely silent.

While the argument that this conversation must be allowed to proceed and achieve a resolution with minimal external intervention is sensible and ethically correct, this prescription is pretty impractical. For the ongoing conversation is also a significant exchange with the outside world. Following the September 11 events, some commentators have noted what they called the "religionization" of American discourse on the issue. The phenomenon goes back much further. For example, as Sir Edmund Allenby's conquest of Jerusalem from the Ottomans in 1917 was portrayed by him and by much of the British press at that time as the final chapter in the Crusades. The sense of the sense o

The importation of religion into political conflict in this region is thus no preserve of radical Islamists. Before the Islamic Revolution in Iran, there was the "Jewish Revolution" in Palestine. When Yarmulka-

¹⁰⁷ Wittes, "The Promise of Arab Liberalism," Policy Review.

¹⁰⁸ Joshua Micah Marshall, "The Orwell Temptation: Are intellectuals overthinking the Middle East?" Washington Monthly, May 2003, http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2003/0305.marshall.html.

¹⁰⁹ Abdelwahab El-Affendi, "Liberalism by Default," Arab Reform Bulletin, February 2004.

¹¹⁰ Mark Juergensmeyer, "Religious Terror and Global War," in Understanding September 11, Calhoun et. al. (New York: The New Press), 29.

¹¹¹ Karen Armstrong, Jerusalem (New York: Ballantine Books, 1997).

wearing Israeli soldiers routed the Arab armies and took over Jerusalem in June 1967, the event was read in two different ways on both sides of the divide. On the one side, it was seen as the success of the modern army of a pro-western democratic state against the incompetent and ill-equipped armies of despotic and backward regimes allied to the Soviet Union. On the other, this was the triumph of a small religiously motivated community against a secular opponent. The rhetoric emanating from Washington is thus just another twist in this long "conversation." Religion may not be the cause of this conflict, but it is certainly being increasingly used as a weapon in it.

The West is thus deeply involved in the ongoing conversation on Islamic revivalism, albeit indirectly. Those who want a direct involvement prescribe joining it on the side of the "liberals" and secularists to remedy the problem of the absence of "broad-based democratic constituencies" 112 and the weakness and fragmentation of liberal forces. 113 U.S. democracy promotion strategies have been criticized for the tendency to rely on "building out from a core of like-minded liberal reformers in the Arab world."114 The problem with this strategy is not mainly that members of this constituency are "increasingly aging, increasingly isolated, and diminishing in number" and have all but lost the battle for the hearts and minds in their countries. 115 It is therefore not entirely relevant to argue that the ranks of the liberals are in fact growing. 116 The point is that the apparent attempt to promote oldfashioned and pro-western liberalism is, at least in the short and medium term, at variance with the attempt to promote democracy. Some analysts admit as much and frankly espouse an anti-democratic line, calling for a prolonged period of "authoritarian liberalism" in order to prepare the Muslims for democracy.¹¹⁷ While not entirely espousing this strong view, the current policies of democracy promotion in fact implicitly put in practice something very similar. These efforts seek less to help those fighting for democracy as to try to transform societies and recreate them anew. Such a strategy is rightly being perceived by the bulk of society as hostile and subversive, and is not likely to promote dialogue.

By pursuing a long-term strategy of social transformation that depends on a narrow stratum of pro-western elite, the United States puts itself at once at war with entrenched regimes as well as with whole societies. Even more significantly, this policy lacks a moral core. Analysts have contrasted the U.S. policy towards Eastern Europe during the Cold War and the current democracy promotion in the Middle East by precisely pointing to the fact that in the latter the United States is in a struggle with mass movements in contrast to its fight with isolated regimes in the former. As the DSB Task Force report succinctly put it,

In stark contrast to the Cold War, the United States today is not seeking to contain a threatening state/empire, but rather seeking to convert a broad movement within Islamic civilization to accept the value structure of Western Modernity — an agenda hidden within the official rubric of a "War on Terrorism." 118

Additionally, it has been pointed out, "while the Cold War represented a confrontation between governments, this new battle was one brought on by the failure of governments." 119 However, the main contrast is that in the Cold War contest the West was engaged

¹¹² Marina Ottaway, "Democracy and Constituencies in the Arab World," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 2004.

¹¹³ Jon B. Alterman, "The False Promise of Arab Liberals," Policy Review, no. 125 (June-July 2004), http://www.policyreview.org/jun04/alterman.html>.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Barry Rubin, Tamara Cofman Wittes and Laith Kubba, "Arab Liberalism and Democracy in the Middle East: A Panel Discussion," Middle East Review of International Affairs. 8, No. 4 (December 2004).

¹¹⁷ Miller, "The Challenge of Radical Islam," Foreign Affairs; Fareed Zakaria, "The Rise of Illiberal Democracy," Foreign Affairs (November–December 1997).

¹¹⁸ Defense Science Board, Report of Task Force on Strategic Communication, 36.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

in the promotion of values and prospects that both appealed to the target populations' value system and to their national and individual aspirations. In the Middle East, however, the West is seeking to modify and transform the value system while at the same time acting against the perceived interests and the national aspirations of the region's peoples. Those aligning themselves with the United States (the "liberal" strata mentioned above) figure in the public consciousness both as renegades in terms of the value system, and as "traitors" in relation to the people's cherished causes.

This ethical dimension of the crisis of liberalism in the Arab world is illustrated by the "clash of values," where those advocating good relations with Israel and support for U.S. policies are habitually described as "courageous" by most western sources, but are often treated as pariahs at home and regarded as "traitors" and sell-outs. While it does indeed take a lot of courage to defy prevalent attitudes, it is hard to sell this stance ethically when it consists mainly of a "realistic" counsel to submit to the dictates of overwhelming hostile power against both one's values and interests. It gets worse when the ability of these advocates of moderation to obtain even minor concessions from the other side appears extremely limited.

There are signs, though, that the liberals are improving their chances by building alliances with other social and political forces. Such alliances are facilitated by disillusionment with rival ideologies, which makes groups such as moderate Islamists and nationalists agree to join coalitions built around support for democratic values. A breakthrough could be facilitated if democratic coalitions could be given a boost through help in resolving festering crises, for example through the acceleration of the Middle East peace process.

The Bush administration is also showing signs of softening its position on Islamist inclusion, which is a

positive development even though ironically it is the Islamists who are more reluctant to engage with the United States in dialogue. Given the current climate, this is no surprise. During Condoleezza Rice's recent visit to Egypt in June 2005, even representatives of the main umbrella opposition group, The Egyptian Movement for Change—known better by its slogan *kifaya*, or "Enough!"— rebuffed her invitation for a meeting for fear of losing popular support.

THE DEMOCRATIZATION DILEMMA

The urgency of democracy promotion has been underlined by the realization that public diplomacy cannot on its own promote mutual understanding in societies where regimes are virtually at war with society. Because the United States is also friendly with these regimes, it has been implicated in this war, and democracy promotion, like the search for peace in the Middle East, becomes indispensable for reducing tensions and dealing with the root causes of anti-Americanism and terrorist violence.

The case for democracy being the cure for terrorism is summed up by Benjamin R. Barber thus:

It is a truism that democracies rarely make war on one another. The corollary... is that democracies rarely produce international terrorism and international violence. Sectarian violence on behalf of ethnic identity or subnational aspirations to independence may nurture violence within democracies... But the preponderance of organizations on the State Department's terrorist organization list operate within undemocratic regimes or are sponsored by undemocratic regimes.¹²⁰

Jennifer L. Windsor advances a slightly more sophisticated version of Barber's thesis, admitting that tyranny does not necessarily breed terrorism, while democracy may not necessarily avert it.

120 Benjamin Barber, Fear's Empire: War, Terrorism, and Democracy (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 146.

Although not without risks, and only if pursued as part of a broader strategy, democratization can help reshape the climates in which terrorism thrives. More specifically, promoting democratization in the closed societies of the Middle East can provide a set of values and ideas that offer a powerful alternative to the appeal of the kind of extremism that today has found expression in terrorist activity, often against U.S. interests.¹²¹

Barber underpins his argument about terrorism being alien to democracy by making a distinction between international and domestic terrorism. Some forms of terrorism with a domestic agenda can arise in democratic societies, while terrorist groups originating in dictatorial systems often target democracies because of their support for tyrannies. Windsor adds the point that, in addition to the frustration bred by lack of avenues for free self expression and peaceful voicing of grievances, local tyrannies deliberately disseminate misleading information which foments anti-Americanism in order to divert attention from their own responsibility for the deep crises engulfing their societies.¹²²

However, many analysts argue that, far from being the consequence of lack of democracy, terrorism is a phenomenon that is exclusive to democracies. Terrorism rarely occurs against repressive regimes, and when it does, it is quickly and effectively eradicated. Some analysts even include this in the very definition of terrorism, classifying as terrorism only acts directed against democracies. This sums up the ambivalence felt towards violence directed against despotic regimes, which are by nature involved in sustained large-scale violence against the innocent. France, for example, took a long time before engaging in decisive action against the Spanish Basque separatist group

ETA, which started its operation in the dying days of the fascist regime of Franco in Spain.¹²⁵

In fact, it is the responsiveness of democracies to acts of political blackmail and their heightened sensitivity to random violence that provide an ambience conducive to achieving terrorist objectives. The more prosperous and stable a democracy is, the higher the value it puts on the safety of each of its citizens, and the more open it becomes to terrorist blackmail. The existence of free media and the inability of governments to control the flow of information make it easier for terrorists to achieve maximum damage by spreading fear through randomly targeted violence. It can thus be safely said that terrorism is a problem specific to democracies. In particular, it is a threat to the very fabric of democratic societies, seeking to undermine state legitimacy and the very democratic political culture that underpins it, its "inner soul" so to speak.126

The instinctive political reaction to terrorism is usually to roll back democratic freedoms. The United States and its allies have taken giant strides in this regard. However, any measures short of completely shutting down the democratic system will only be counterproductive, since partial measures only antagonize larger segments of opinion without permitting the kind of drastic measures taken in Argentina in the 1970's, or Algeria and Egypt in the 1990's. Some countries have experimented with what could be termed a "democratic response" to terrorism, as in Spain in March 2004, when over 11 million citizens marched on the streets to show the people's resolve not to bow down to terrorists. A similar demonstration was organized in Doha to protest the bombing of an English school in March 2005.

¹²¹ Jennifer L. Windsor, "Promoting Democratization Can Combat Terrorism," The Washington Quarterly, 26, No. 3 (Summer 2003), 43.

¹²² Ibid., 45-6.

¹²³ Laqueur, No end to war, 14, 141.

¹²⁴ Philipe B. Heymann, Terrorism and America: A Commonsense Strategy for a Democratic Society (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998).

¹²⁵ Cindy R. Jebb, "The Fight for Legitimacy: Liberal Democracy versus Terrorism," The Journal of Conflict Studies 23, No. 1 (Spring 2003).

¹²⁶ Ibid., 7.

Strengthening and helping to spread democracy is in any case a commendable cause, and cannot be described as a counterproductive measure when dealing with terrorism, even if it is clear that it is no instant solution. In the specific case of the Middle East, the popularity of violent groups is a function of the existing distorted political structures, and not an inherent Arab, Muslim, or Jewish inclination. The popularity of Hizballah in Lebanon has been earned through hard-nosed political action; it was never a given and is still precarious. It is mainly a function of disillusionment with the ability of Arab states to negotiate or force concessions out of Israel, compared to Hizballah's apparent effectiveness in achieving both. One should expect that the emergence of a democratic and internationally effective political authority in Lebanon would make this organization redundant, since the function of defending the territorial integrity of the country would devolve on such a government. The same could be expected in Palestine for Hamas and other militant groups.

By the same token, promoting and propping up dictatorships would not be the solution here either, given that the Middle East appears to be the exception to the worldwide rule as the only region where terrorism and despotism coexist happily. This is due in part to the fact that many states in the region use terrorism as a foreign (and sometimes domestic) policy tool. But it is also due to the fact that the twin scourges of terrorism and despotism appear to have the same source: the dysfunctional state system, where states lack both effectiveness and political authority. In fact, regimes survive here precisely by turning into terrorist outfits that hold the whole population hostage. While the Ba'thist regimes in Iraq and Syria—and their authoritarian counterpart in Libya-acted more openly and consistently in this terrorist style, others only distinguish themselves by being subtler. Such states lose

their claim to the legitimate monopoly of violence and often relinquish it, voluntarily or under pressure, to groups, such as Hizballah, that are more capable of deploying and using violence effectively.

Given the nature of this deep-rooted crisis, it is no surprise that the repeatedly signaled major shift in U.S. policy towards active democracy promotion in the Middle East did not receive a resounding welcome from the region. The "forward strategy for freedom" first announced in a speech President George W. Bush delivered to the National Endowment of Democracy in Washington in November 2003 was, in the words of one analyst,

the long-anticipated political face of America's counterterrorism effort. Deeper and more meaningful than any attempt to "win hearts and minds" for America itself, it is an effort to win Arab hearts and minds over to the practice of American values and virtues—whether the new practitioners ultimately embrace America and its policies or not.¹²⁷

The new democracy promotion rhetoric appeared to signal a shift in gear from earlier initiatives, such as the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), launched by the State Department in December 2002 as the first practical step in the area of democracy promotion in the Middle East. MEPI was angrily dismissed by many as a misguided public relations exercise which "added insult to injury" by proposing to interfere in internal Arab politics and only earmarking puny resources for this exercise. By allocating only a tiny amount of money (\$29m) for democracy promotion, the initiative has shown, it has been claimed, "the extent to which the ruling elite in Washington despises the Arabs, and the degree to which it has no serious intention of resisting dictatorships in the region."128 While the allocations to the

¹²⁷ Wittes, "The Promise of Arab Liberalism," Policy Review.

¹²⁸ Marina Ottaway, "Promoting Democracy in the Middle East: The Problem of U.S. Credibility," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 2003.

program were later increased, reaching some \$98m in its first 15 months, the program still remained very cautious, and focused "less on political change than on improving the performance of Arab governments, economies, and schools." 129

Partly in response to criticisms of the initiative, the administration launched the "Greater Middle East Initiative," first detailed in a document leaked to the Arab press in February 2004, and later adopted by the G-8 Summit in June 2004 in a watered down form as "The Broader Middle East Initiative." Even in its original version, the initiative faced vociferous criticism. The Europeans charged that it ignored their own ongoing initiatives enshrined in the Barcelona process, paid little attention to major regional problems, such the Arab-Israeli conflict, and did not engage in prior consultation with allies and partners. Arab governments were even more furious, repeating similar charges against lack of consultation and neglect of the Arab-Israeli conflict.¹³⁰ For the Arab publics, the problem of credibility and consistency was raised again, while many opposition groups agreed with their governments that reform in the Arab world was none of America's business. America, critics argued, wanted to impose its own priorities on the region, get rid of "undesirable" regimes, achieve hegemony over the region and integrate Israel into the "Greater Middle East" before an agreed resolution to the Palestinian issue was reached.¹³¹ The Helsinki analogy used in promoting the initiative also created fears among Arab regimes about a hostile Cold War-style maneuver seeking to undermine and subvert the Arab system. 132 For many Arab regimes, Washington replaced Nasser's Cairo and Khomeini's Tehran as the new capital of revolutionary subversion.

Despots need not have worried that much, since the initiative, even in its original form criticized by the Europeans and others as "arrogant", "patronizing" and overambitious, offered little more the usual tinkering around the edges of unreformable Arab regimes. By sidestepping the Palestinian issue, offering democracy assistance designed for governments presumed to be already serious about democratization, and by treading cautiously around friendly autocratic regimes, the initiative ensured that it was "hollow at the core," devoid of any real democratizing potential.¹³³ The regional approach adopted also ensured that countryspecific issues will remain out of focus, thus playing into the hands of Arab rulers who wanted to avoid action by passing the ball to regional bodies such as the Arab League. The latter organization, these leaders know full well, is not empowered to discuss the internal affairs of member states, and is in any case powerless to enforce even unanimously adopted resolutions. None of the Arab rulers need Arab League approval to implement reforms if there was any serious intention to engage in such policies. The Arab declarations drafted in Tunis in May 2004 and elsewhere were not meant to initiate reform but to avoid it.

To make matters worse, the final product which emerged from the G-8 summit after taking account of Arab and European misgivings was even more hollow and inconsequential. Its diffuse prescriptions represented, as some critics rightly argued, a de facto endorsement of a "continued partnership with authoritarian regimes and the exclusion of democratic reformers." It signifies a hesitation to break away from the old approach of courting "desirable dictators," a situation some analysts feel is not only unlikely to change soon.

¹²⁹ Wittes, "The Promise of Arab Liberalism," Policy Review.

¹³⁰ International Crisis Group, "The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative," 5-6.

¹³¹ Ottaway, "Promoting Democracy in the Middle East: The Problem of U.S. Credibility," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Hawthorne, Political Reform in the Arab World: A New Ferment? Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Wittes, "The Promise of Arab Liberalism," Policy Review.

¹³² Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, "The Greater Middle East Initiative: Off to a False Start," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 29 March 2004.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Jillian Schwedler and Maren Milligan, "Middle East Reform: Right Idea, Wrong Plan," Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 20 June 2004.

It is inconceivable in the real world of power politics that either the U.S. or the EU would ever choose to cut themselves loose entirely from friendly but authoritarian governments in order to throw their full support behind...non-governmental actors.¹³⁵

The editors of a recent volume which examined the reform drive found little enthusiasm among the entrenched regimes to undertake meaningful reform, and also doubted, given the bonds of common interests between these regimes and the United States, "whether the new pro-democracy impulse will result in a fundamental change of the long-standing U.S. support for authoritarian and semi-authoritarian friends in the region or simply end up as a an attractive wrapping around a largely unchanged core." ¹³⁶

And if this was not enough, the final BMEI document included many sleights of hand of false accounting, since each of the countries tabled its ongoing and largely peripheral projects as part of the new initiative, thus ensuring that it became even more inconsequential. All this makes redundant the worries of Arab regimes or those of the proponents of the traditional "pragmatic" stance, recently forcefully reiterated by Richard N. Haass, former director of policy planning for the State Department, who warned that the Bush administration's apparent determination to make democracy promotion an absolute priority could be detrimental to vital American interests. Pressure on despotic regimes, Haass argued, would jeopardize needed cooperation on other more vital issues, such as counter-terrorism, nuclear proliferation and Middle East peace, and could lead to the emergence of new regimes that were infinitely worse.137 They need not worry about such serious concerns, as the democratization programs are not serious.

These fears (like the hopes of democrats) have further been dissipated by the outcome of the first meeting of the Forum for the Future held in Morocco in December 2004. This forum, which provides for periodic consultation among the G-8 foreign ministers and their Middle Eastern colleagues, is the BMEI's centerpiece. Its first meeting was consumed by much bickering about priorities and came up with no concrete results. Arab ministers insisted on bringing the Arab-Israeli conflict in, while the United States kept arguing that reforms cannot be held up until the dispute was resolved. 138 In another rather ironic twist, the spokesmen for the entrenched Arab regimes turned the Bush doctrine on its head, arguing that the invasion of Iraq, which was heralded as the launching pad for democratization in the region, was becoming another obstacle to reform because of the spiraling violence there. The unpopularity of U.S. involvement in Iraq, it was argued, increased tensions in the region, adding another grievance against America and further undermining its role in the region.139

This was additional evidence, if any was needed, that setting up a forum in which representatives of dictatorial regime would debate democratization is akin to creating the "bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri Forum for Counter-terrorism." The forum's timid and patronizing measures also assigned a marginal role to the real proponents of democracy in the region (the many political and civil society activists who pay heavily for their convictions) and insulted their courageous struggle by suggesting implicitly (and often explicitly) that the region's societies were not yet ready for democracy. The main provisions of the initiative hinge around such proposals as providing microfinance for small entrepreneurs, literacy campaigns, teacher training, and help with investment, employment and other development issues. This clearly suggests that the people of the Middle East lack democracy because

¹³⁵ International Crisis Group, "The Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative," 5-6.

¹³⁶ Ottaway and Carothers, "The Greater Middle East Initiative: Off to a False Start," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 5, 7.

¹³⁷ Richard Haass, "Freedom Is Not a Doctrine," The Washington Post, 24 January 2005.

¹³⁸ Glenn Kessler, "Arabs Reject U.S. Push for Reform," The Washington Post, 12 December 2004.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

they are poor, illiterate and underdeveloped, and not because they suffer under dictators and autocrats intent on depriving them of their freedoms. The approach also neglects the fact that, in order for such development initiatives to succeed, not only is the good will and full cooperation of governments necessary, but development measures, while "no doubt desirable for their own sake," if taken in isolation, are "unlikely to be effective in creating an environment envisioned by the Initiative." ¹⁴⁰

An additional complication was the attitude towards some of the worst offenders in the human rights league, such as Libya and Tunisia. The Tunisian President was the first Arab leader welcomed to the White House a few days after the Bush initiative was made public in February 2004. Many Arab democracy activists and human rights campaigners described his visit as "putting Bush's [Greater Middle East Initiative] on the line" and called on Bush to put serious pressure on Ben Ali to reform. According to a Human Rights Watch spokesperson, "Tunisia bills itself as a moderate Muslim nation. But there is nothing moderate in the way authorities repress nearly all forms of dissent."141 Leading human rights campaigners expressed disappointment at the outcome of the visit, arguing that "giving this ruthless autocrat a long-coveted audience at the White House" did not seem to be the right way to promote Middle East democracy. "To his credit," one leading Tunisian exiled journalist and human rights campaigner wrote in The New York Times, "Mr. Bush rebuked Mr. ben Ali for his violations of press freedom, but the United States is sorely mistaken if it believes that democracy and the rule of law can ever take hold under leaders like Mr. ben Ali....Tunisia today is one of the world's most efficient police states." 142 Worse still, the Libyan regime, whose human rights record is often described

as "appalling," ¹⁴³ was rewarded by the lifting of sanctions and virtual rehabilitation following its agreement to pay reparations for terrorist atrocities and abandon its rudimentary nuclear program. This rehabilitation was effected without making any serious demands for respect for freedoms or basic human rights. One Arab commentator cited this instance of "regime laundering" as a confirmation of the worst suspicions about real American intentions—liberty is mentioned, but what is really meant is subservience to the dictates of Washington. ¹⁴⁴

All this ensured that, rather than tackling the combined problems for which it was designed to address, the new initiative is fast becoming a new problem in itself, contributing additional grievances and casting new doubts on U.S. credibility and seriousness. The final outcome of the initiative and the humiliating climbdown reflected, as a *Washington Post* editorial put it, the administration's "defensiveness and weakening authority with both Arabs and Europeans." ¹⁴⁵

The half-hearted measures have achieved the worst of all possible outcomes: alienating and annoying the regimes, upsetting important political actors and disappointing the democracy campaigners. However, the drive itself is having some unintended consequences. Opposition movements throughout the region have been emboldened by the confusion and disarray within the regimes, which are now running scared. This in itself may create a momentum for change, as we can see from glimpses of activism in Lebanon, Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. The fear, however, is of a repeat of what happened in Iraq in 1991, when President George H.W. Bush encouraged the Iraqis to mount an uprising, and then abandoned them to their fate. The three Saudi reformists currently languishing in jail for over year for the "crime" of

¹⁴⁰ Robert Looney, "The Broader Middle East Initiative: Requirements for Success in the Gulf," Strategic Insights 3, No. 8 (August 2004).

¹⁴¹ Human Rights Watch, "Tunisia: Putting Bush's Initiative on the Line," March 2004, http://www.hrw.org/update/2004/03>.

¹⁴² Kamel Labidi, "The Wrong Man to Promote Democracy," The New York Times, 21 February 2004.

¹⁴³ Human Rights Watch, "Libya's Human Rights Record in Spotlight," 17 January 2003.

¹⁴⁴ Elias Khouri, "Democratic Laundering," Al Quds Al Arabi, 25 January 2005.

¹⁴⁵ The Washington Post, "A start on democracy," 28 April 2004.

addressing a memorandum to the King demanding reform must surely have that bitter after-taste the Iraqis had in the spring of 1991. Their bitterness and the disillusionment of Arab democracy activism has been accentuated by the fact these activists have been sentenced to long jail sentences (up to 9 years) in May 2004, less than a month after then Crown Prince Abdullah was cordially received at Bush's Texas ranch. For many, this sent a signal that Prince Abdullah had obtained Bush's tacit approval to crack down on the peaceful opposition.

During her June visit to the region, Secretary Rice made a valiant effort to walk the tight rope dictated by this policy predicament, assuring democracy activists of full support against their oppressors, while at the same time giving the latter a stern talking to as diplomatic niceties would allow. In her June 20 speech at the American University of Cairo, she addressed herself to the "millions of people [who] are demanding freedom for themselves and democracy for their countries," saying: "To these courageous men and women, I say today: All free nations will stand with you as you secure the blessings of your own liberty." ¹⁴⁶ That is a very solemn undertaking, and the whole world will be watching to see how it would be honored.

THE CHALLENGE OF LISTENING

The predicament that Rice and other U.S. officials continue to face stems from the fact that given the current rift between regimes and people, the demands of public diplomacy would be in direct contradiction with those of conventional diplomacy. If the present political stagnation persists, public diplomacy initiatives will remain ineffective and even counterproductive. The United States would have to speak in two tongues: directing one discourse to the rulers and another to the wider public, a practice that had often prevailed in the past and is sure to under-

mine both endeavors. Further damage is done by the fact that the signals coming from Washington appear confused and confusing to Middle Easterners and others, particularly by the flip-flopping between high pitch rhetoric about radical change and tame initiatives that are premised on close cooperation with incumbent despots.

Given the rather unique conditions that exist in the region, the real paradigmatic shift that may be necessary is the realization that public diplomacy in the Middle East may not need to be treated as a supplement to conventional diplomacy, but as an alternative approach (even a substitute) for the latter. The current impasse in U.S. policy is due to the inability to affect this paradigmatic shift. It must realize that when talking to governments comes into conflict with talking to the people, and in particular to the genuine democratic forces, talking to the people must be given priority. This would be a delicate tight-rope walk, given that the United States has not decided at the moment to break off dialogue with incumbent regimes, or even show indifference to their views (as was the case with Communist regimes during the Cold War). The challenge is to send a consistent message of support for democracy, and avoid sending conflicting messages, as happened recently, when First Lady Laura Bush praised Egyptian political reforms that are considered by Egyptian democratic forces as cosmetic and inadequate, earning herself some criticism in Cairo and Washington. Again, Secretary Rice has shown sufficient dexterity in walking this tight rope, combining public discourse (a lecture at AUC and press conferences) with forthright diplomatic exchanges. But even she came under criticism from Arab opposition figures for not being firm enough with incumbent despots.147

Some of the critiques of U.S. public diplomacy initiatives point to the fact that these initiatives sometimes become counterproductive by failing to "speak the

¹⁴⁶ Condoleeza Rice, "Remarks at the American University in Cairo, Cairo, Egypt," 20 June 2005 www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2005/c15063.htm. 147 Steven R. Weisman, "Rice Urges Egyptians and Saudis to Democratize," *The New York Times*, 21 June 2005.

language" of the target audiences or to take accounts of cultural sensitivities. 148 Others argue that the United States has "failed to listen" adequately to the target audiences, and this contributed to the ineffectiveness of campaigns.

We must begin by listening to that audience, because if we do not understand what resonates with them we have only a serendipitous chance of succeeding. Much of the current U.S. effort concentrates on delivering "the message" and omits the essential first step of listening to our targeted audiences. We can craft a message that actually gets through only by using language, symbols, and images that resonate with the targeted audience.¹⁴⁹

Neoconservatives are adamantly opposed to such a policy, arguing that the war of ideas must avoid haggling over policy. What is at issue is to sell American policy just as it is, and one must desist from "the obviously self-defeating approach of changing policies to appease the critics." Public diplomacy has thus to concentrate instead on ensuring that the target audience's opinions "are at least based on accurate, dispassionate information." 150

Proponents of this view also argue that the problem that needs to be addressed is not a problem of policy, but the dysfunctional character of Middle Eastern societies. For this purpose, the objective is to transform these societies, at gunpoint if necessary. For these thinkers the "war of ideas" is not a metaphorical endeavor but a real one. The United States should support and empower the beleaguered and dwindling "liberal" pro-western minorities, and help them wage

war (metaphorical but real if need be) against their more numerous and socially entrenched opponents. The United States must not only encourage democratic transformation, but also religious reform, complete with a crusade if necessary to achieve this.¹⁵¹

The question of whether the rise in violent anti-Americanism could be blamed on what is wrong with America or what is wrong with the Middle East is problematic in that both answers are right. There is plenty that is wrong with the way the United States conducted itself in the region since the coup against the elected government of Mosaddeq in Iran in 1953, and there is plenty that is wrong with Middle Eastern governments and societies. The question thus boils down to which ills should be cured first? Is a radical change in U.S. policies a condition for reform in the region and moderating its hostility to America, or is reforming the region the condition for a shift in American policies towards a more friendly and constructive engagement with the region? And, more to the point, supposing that reform is the priority, how is it possible for the United States to help this reform along given the deep and widespread hostility to all things American which leads even reformers to suspect U.S. intentions?¹⁵²

We seem to be confronted with a vicious circle here: in order for the U.S. image in the region to improve, U.S. support for reform is needed; but in order for U.S. contribution to the reform to be effective, America's image needs to be substantially improved, and its credibility restored. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that U.S. initiatives, whether in the realm of democracy promotion or public diplomacy appear to have exacerbated the credibility gap. The blunders in

¹⁴⁸ R.S. Zaharna, "Winning Round Two of American Public Diplomacy in the Arab and Muslim Worlds," Foreign Policy In Focus 13 June 2003, http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2003/0306comm.html.

¹⁴⁹ Defense Science Board, Report of Task Force on Strategic Communication, 38; Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World, "Changing Minds, Winning Peace," 24.

¹⁵⁰ Satloff, The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror.

¹⁵¹ Bar, "The Religious Sources of Islamic Terrorism," *Policy Review*; Satloff, *The Battle of Ideas in the War on Terror*, Waldman, 2004, Marshall, 2003b; Cf. Asmus and Pollack, 2003).

¹⁵² Edward S. Walker, "Some ideas for better U.S.–Arab dialogue," *The Daily Star*, 3 May 2005, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=10&categ_id=5&article_id=14742.

Iraq and transparently instrumentalist leanings surrounding the campaign to "win hearts and minds," tends to create the impression that what the United States is intent on is to "conquer," rather than "win" hearts and minds. The link of public diplomacy campaigns with the war on terror and the fact they are fronted by the military/intelligence apparatus tend to lend credence to this impression.

One way of breaking this vicious circle could be the "direct approach" adopted in Iraq, where the United States would take direct responsibility for reform and hopes to have collect dividends for its image as a liberator and promoter of democracy. This approach has been alternatively praised as one of America's "historic actions and achievements" where the United States is working to build a "strong, transparent, democratic and viable Iraq" which would "become a lodestone for democratic changes and a surrogate for the United States to achieve democratic changes in the Middle East," 153 or condemned as an unmitigated disaster where the approach adopted "has shown no signs of fostering success... and only promises to raise the cost of failure." 154 The U.S. intervention has either ushered in the dawn of democracy, or has simply "replaced an overt and brutal dictatorship by Saddam Hussein with a covert and subtle dictatorship by the Marja-e-Tagleed, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani." 155 However, the main drawback of the Iraq strategy stems from the problem with the overall approach we have been trying to highlight throughout this paper. At one level, we have a military-led approach which regards the intervention in Iraq as part of the war on terror, and where the paramount concern is to win military victory and assert full control. Democracy and state building were a secondary concern, and postwar political planning was largely neglected. 156 At another level, the United States is forced, as in its

public diplomacy campaign, to deal directly with a hostile population without the benefit of the mediation of a friendly (or even a hostile) government whose legitimacy is accepted by the population. Both in war and dialogue, the United States is finding itself in direct confrontation with the wider public, often having to discharge the responsibilities of government and security forces.

Thus the failures and successes of Iraq should not be taken as a template for what works and what does not work in democracy promotion in the region, except for indicating that the general aggressive and militaristic approach has its obvious limitations and is not particularly suited to the objective of winning hearts and minds. This can be seen from the way politicians since George H.W. Bush kept comparing Iraq and Vietnam, arguing that the victory in Kuwait in 1991 has ensured that America "kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all." 157 This view is based on the misconception that Vietnam had been a military defeat which a victory over a tin pot dictator like Saddam would avenge. However, the lesson from Vietnam was not a military but a political one: the U.S.-supported vision crumbled in front of an alternative that was equally alien to the local culture, but was embraced by many as one which afforded more dignity to the nation. In Rumsfeldian terms, the United States has then lost the "war of ideas." The challenge is similar in Iraq today, and lobbing bombs into urban areas and roughing up prisoners is not the answer.

Regardless of the difficulties in Iraq, it is clear that seeking to break the impasse through vigorously pursuing democratization is the right way to proceed. If there is a problem, it is not that the United States is seeking to "impose democracy from abroad," or to

¹⁵³ Ghougassian, "Public diplomacy in the Middle East," The American Thinker.

¹⁵⁴ Steve Chapman, "The sobering reality of the Iraq war," Chicago Tribune, 2 June 2005, http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/columnists/chi-0506020021jun02,1,5831479.column?coll=chi-news-col&ctrack=1&cset=true.

¹⁵⁵ Muqtedar Khan, "Have Iraqis Voted for a Dictatorship?" Daily Times, 13 February 2005.

¹⁵⁶ Michael O'Hanlon, "Iraq Without a Plan," Policy Review, January 2005, http://www.brookings.edu/views/articles/ohanlon/20050101.htm>.

¹⁵⁷ Sharon Smith, "Ghost of Vietnam," Socialist Review, June 1999, http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/sr231/smith.htm.

"export America's experience" to the Middle East, ¹⁵⁸ as critics complain. It is that the U.S. proposals for democratization are too timid and half-hearted. Not only have they failed to stop the bullies of the region from continuing their gross abuses of human rights, but also the United States has unfortunately joined them with abuses of its own, thus undermining its moral authority even further and giving the local despots more excuses to defy its exhortations.

By further exacerbating the credibility problem the democracy promotion drive, like the public diplomacy initiatives, has now become part of the problem and not the solution. Suspicions that ulterior motives wrapped in the democracy rhetoric are behind the campaign have been enhanced by the apparent tendency to direct criticism at undemocratic practices of unfriendly regimes such as Syria and Iran, while pussyfooting around friendly offenders such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia. This could signal a return to Cold War selectivity, an approach that was not successful either. Only in Sudan (and more recently in Lebanon) has the sustained employment of pressure against hostile regimes resulted in dramatic and positive shifts towards democracy.

The partial success in Sudan was ironically the result of a subtle shift towards a more accommodating stance towards the Islamist regime in Khartoum, in a marked shift from the aggressively hostile policies that characterized most of the Clinton era. In the last year of the Clinton administration, it reluctantly accepted an offer from Khartoum for intelligence cooperation. The Bush administration continued with this policy, and relations improved so much that the United States agreed in September 2001 (a week before the terrorist attacks) to the lifting of U.N. sanctions imposed on Sudan, and appointed a special envoy to the country (Senator John Danforth) that same month. It did not take long for the envoy to achieve a small, but significant, breakthrough in peace talks. This created a momentum that culminated in the peace deal which was finally signed in January 2005, and which American engagement was instrumental.

The developments in Sudan cannot be termed as a complete success yet, since the accords have yet to be implemented, and the serious crisis in Darfur still awaits resolution. However, what has been achieved surpasses by far any similar advance except in Iraq. And the lesson from Khartoum is that positive engagement with both sides, coupled with firm pressure is the method most likely to achieve results.

Incidentally, Sudan is also one country where the regime had deliberately sought to foment anti-Americanism in a country where such sentiments were not widespread in order to mobilize popular support, but did not meet with much success. The policy has also now been largely reversed following the increase in cooperation with the United States. There might be some lessons here as well.

The main task in democracy promotion, however, may need to be directed towards countries friendly to the United States (in particular Tunisia, Jordan, Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait), which appear to be ready for positive change, and where firm pressure is also needed and can be effective. Tunisia, for example, appears to be the country ripest for speedy and safe democratization. In that country, the Islamists have long espoused a consistent pro-democracy line, while the liberals no longer buy into the regime's scaremongering about the Islamist menace. Egypt is also evolving in the same direction, if more slowly. However, in both countries the increasingly isolated regimes are adopting a very inflexible line that has become the main obstacle to democratization. The United States can greatly enhance its credibility and advance its democratization agenda by leaning very heavily and very publicly on these regimes to reform. At the minimum the United States should make good on its promise to protect democracy activists from victimization by friendly regimes.

There is also a need to engage positively with important political actors, including Islamists and democratic groups outside the small pro-western liberal circles and those who offer unconditional support for U.S. policies. For example, while it is important to engage with leaders like Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) in Palestine, who in the end represents the entrenched exiled elite, one must not neglect other important actors, such as Abbas's main rival, Mustafa al-Barghouthi, who is locally viewed as a genuine democrat with strong links to civil society and the masses. Elsewhere, the pro-democracy forces incorporate large sections of the moderate Islamists and nationalists who are now agitating for change. U.S. policy makers may need to engage them in dialogue directly and openly regardless of what the "friendly" regimes say or think. The exercise is going to be difficult and fraught with risks. For one thing, most of these movements may refuse to talk to the United States. The alternative, however, may be to remain in the current impasse of stalled initiatives which lead nowhere.

CONCLUSION

Even though it is an unfortunate but understandable indirect homage to terrorism, the sudden enthusiasm in Washington for engaging with the Muslim world is overall a positive development. The link of outreach programs to the war on terror may have been inevitable, given the traumatic impact of September 11, and the insight regarding the need for a "struggle of ideas" to contain terrorism is largely sound. Terrorism (and violence in general), it has been argued, is an extreme form of political communication.¹⁵⁹ That it is an extremely effective form of communication can be easily seen from the amount of ink, blood and treasure that has been spilt since 9/11 to respond to just such one loud message. By virtue of its very being outrageous and threatening to wide sections of humanity, terrorist violence does concentrate

attention, even if the attention terrorists receive may not be exactly helpful to their purported cause.

Terrorism does not attract attention merely because it is violence, but because it is *political* violence. As "a public performance of violence," the terrorist act is an essentially "political act" which seeks to announce "that the power of the group is equal or superior to that of the state." ¹⁶⁰ It thus poses a political challenge that resonates within the political system in ways that are fundamentally different from the way a simple criminal act resonates. And when the political message contained in the act comes from an outside and alien group, the sense of threat and the degree of mobilization raise to the highest level. Symbols of identity are deployed and mobilized in ways that make inter-cultural communication difficult or impossible in the short term.

The instinctive reaction to the terrorist attacks of September 11 was to mobilize and retrench. Even though many asked the question of why the attacks occurred, few wanted an answer that did not carry a categorical condemnation of the horror. As one observer put it, had President Bush said to the joint session of the Congress in his September 20, 2001 address: "We have fallen victim to these terrorist acts because our policies in the Middle East and the Muslim world have been all wrong, so let us affect some radical changes in this area," he would have received widespread condemnation in the United States. The American people were in no mood for self-criticism.

The attempt to devise a communications strategy in response to violence and in the midst of violence is also at the heart of the current dilemma. When the country which commands unchallenged hegemony in both the technology and arts of communication appears lost for words and unable to deliver its message, this is a symptom of a deeper malaise. Maybe what one is trying to communicate here is simply

¹⁵⁹ Ronald D. Crelinsten, "Analyzing Terrorism and Counter-terrorism: A Communication Model," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 14, No. 2, (Summer 2002).

¹⁶⁰ Juergensmeyer, "Religious Terror and Global War," in Understanding September 11, pp. 30, 33.

incommunicable, even unspeakable. The mutual belief in the existence of dark forces abroad, in sinister motives and insincere gestures, stirs deep fears and feelings of unease that cannot be easily communicated, but they influence behavior very strongly. Intense mistrust prevails, and a terror bordering on paranoia holds whole communities in its grip. If you believe that the enemy cannot be reasoned with, either due to entrenched irrational beliefs, or entrenched non-negotiable interests, then you yourself become unwilling and unable to communicate. As the ongoing debate on Guantanamo detainees and other extreme anti-terror measures indicate, political leaders find it difficult to communicate their deep fears and worries even to their public at home, let alone to potentially hostile publics abroad.

Only when one is able to maintain some distance from the events, when thinking turns to the long-term strategy, could it be recognized that as a political act, terrorism demanded a political response. Terrorism, it has been argued, is an assault on politics, and the correct reaction to terrorism must be the defense of politics. 161 The defense of politics demanded, by extension, the restoration and reconstruction of politics in the countries from which the terrorists came. It also demanded the restoration and reconstruction of international politics on the basis of dialogue and mutual respect and understanding. In this regard, the twin campaigns of public diplomacy directed towards the Muslim world and the initiatives of democracy promotion in the Middle East are the right way to proceed. Whatever misgivings may be harbored about the U.S. role, and whatever discouraging signals coming from Iraq, what is indisputable is that the United States is, and has always been an influential actor in the region. Whatever the United States chooses to do, including doing nothing, will have consequences that will impact U.S. interests and the U.S. image. So, to

paraphrase George W. Bush, the United States is either for democracy and reform, or against them. There is no neutral stance and no convenient hiding place. On the other hand, doing nothing and praying a lot is no guarantee for favorable outcomes. The Islamic revolution has not been engineered by the CIA or the State Department, but it was no less a consequence of U.S. complacency. Today, the Middle East is ripe either for revolution or peaceful reform. Sitting on the sidelines, or intervening in the wrong way, could be as good as voting for a series of new anti-American revolutions.

But it is imperative to start from the right point of departure. In the ongoing debate, even thoughtful interventions like the recent report by the Council on Foreign Relations¹⁶² are often guilty of asking the wrong questions and offering the wrong answers. It is the wrong starting point to ask whether supporting freedom is good for American interests, since such self-interrogation sends the wrong message even when it reassures the people at home. When it comes to answers, it is also a great error to prescribe what Martin Luther King Jr. called (in his "I have a dream" speech in August 1963) "the tranquilizing drug of gradualism," citing the tortuous path which democratic evolution had taken in Europe and the United States. 163 This is a fallacious argument, since historical developments have their own logic. For example, while slavery has been abolished in most of the world, recalcitrant enclaves cannot demand to be given the centuries it took the others to abolish slavery. It might have taken humanity a million years to discover fire, but once discovered, it can be used instantly by all, the same with democracy.

The call for gradualism has a point only when a government which has seriously embarked on the path of democratization requests time to allow proper deliberations on institution building and for the negotiation

¹⁶¹ Peter Alexander Meyers, "Terrorism and the Assault on Politics," in *Understanding September 11*, et. al. Craig Calhoun (New York, The New Press, 2002), 255.

¹⁶² Madeleine K. Albright and Vin Weber, "In Support of Arab Democracy: Why and How? Report of an Independent Task Force" (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2005) http://www.cfr.org/pdf/Arab_Democracy_TF.pdf>.
163 Ibid., 6–7.

of delicate inter-group compromises. For example, the Iraqi authorities have been criticized for being too hasty in moving towards elections without building a national consensus around key issues. However, such delay should be measured in months and years, not decades, and cannot be used as an excuse not to start reform at all or for stalling and or for instituting sham reforms. For example, in this age of the information explosion it is plain ridiculous for regimes to ask to continue with censorship, and to send citizens to prison for visiting forbidden Internet sites.

True, for democracy promotion and outreach initiatives to succeed, some important conditions need to be met. Freedom does not lead automatically to democracy, as the experience of many developing countries, including most Muslim countries remind us. Democracies can and do collapse if the right institutions and checks and balances are not in place. Such institution-building needs creativity, charisma, leaders who are open to compromise, and improving cultural and economic conditions.

When conducting dialogue, it is first important to realize that the dialogue in question is a political discussion and not a sterile debate about religion or theology. The 9/11 Commission and many other authorities have been barking up the wrong tree by delving into the religious writings of Ibn Taymiyyah and others in order to explain 9/11. Even if theology were the problem, which it is not, then it is pointless for outsiders to try to effect a theological reformation in a religion they do not believe in the first place. So by all means, let us discuss religion and its role, but it is best only in the resolution of the political issues that have precipitated the call to arms in the first place.

A second point is that the conversation must tackle real issues and actual points of contention. For example, at the January 2004 U.S.-Islamic World Forum meeting

for dialogue between American and Muslim interlocutors organized by the Brookings Institution and the State of Qatar, a delegate from the American side proposed that the groups not speak about Iraq or Palestine, since there was no point in discussing issues on which agreement is impossible and nothing can be done. Here Americans have to draw from the 9/11 Commission and admit that "American foreign policy is part of the message" and has thus to be part of the debate. ¹⁶⁴

A third point is that when enlisting international support in the fight against terrorism, it is imperative to avoid the main defect of the Oslo process, which initiated a dialogue that skirted the main points of contention and then committed the parties to defend an order with which they did not commit. In contrast, the South African example began by reaching agreement on the shape of the new order before committing all to protect it, and was consequently more successful. By the same token, the current disputes on the definition of terrorism are in fact disputes about what international order can we be expected to submit to and defend against attack. Such a system must be fair and inclusive of all.

A fourth point is that democracy promotion, or more accurately, the fight against the evil of despotism, is an international and a very urgent commitment. The problem of the current initiatives is not, as is widely claimed, that they represent illegitimate interference in the affairs of Arab and Muslim states, but that they do not represent enough interference. Despotic regimes do not have an inherent right to abuse the rights of their citizens, and it is the duty of the whole international community to come to the rescue of those being abused. That duty is enshrined in the U.N. Charter and the international human rights instruments. The least the international community could do is to end its complicity in these gross abuses and denial of rights.

¹⁶⁴ National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "The 9/11 Commission Report," 376.

¹⁶⁵ The U.N. General Assembly's resolution 53/144, issued on 8 March 1999, reaffirmed again the collective responsibility of U.N. member states to ensure the observance of universal human rights for all, including (in article 9) the right of victims of human rights abuses to complain to international bodies.

A fifth point, which is closely related to the previous one, is that the dialogue with the Muslim world (and the public diplomacy campaigns involved) must have as its point of departure the premise of mutual respect. It must be frank, open, and direct. Resort to propaganda, secret schemes or approaches which do not respect the intelligence of the audience are bound to backfire, as has happened with some current and recent U.S. public diplomacy initiatives. It is paramount to dissipate the impression that the United States is out to "conquer" the region, hearts, minds, souls, bodies and all, and instead emphasize the need for a civilized dialogue of equals.

The sixth point is that respect for the peoples of the region must also entail contempt for their oppressors. There can be no more affront to the peoples of the region than the oft-repeated adage that the progress towards democracy in the Middle East must "take generations." Any person who thinks that the lack of democracy is the fault of the victims, who must remain enslaved for at least a generation while they are being civilized and educated, insults the region and its courageous democratic activists. These activists, and the people they are defending, deserve better. Gradualism? By all means, but only for as long as absolutely necessary to carry out reform, and not as an excuse to perpetuate systems that become even more difficult to reform the longer they remain in place.

A seventh point, closely linked to the two earlier ones, is to realize that dialogue with civil society and non-government actors will remain ineffective unless it is conducted within the context of a comprehensive drive for reform. It is no use encouraging exchanges between academics, think tanks, students, women groups etc., 166 if these actors can have no influence whatsoever on either government or the wider society. Many of the so-called think tanks, as well as academic and media institutions etc., in the Middle East are tightly controlled by the governments, and have a narrow margin of freedom and negligible influence on

decision-making. So for these exchanges to be fruitful, these institutions must be given more autonomy, and public freedoms must be extended to enable a wider open dialogue within society.

An eighth point is that the United States must reverse the concession which it has made to the region's despots and their European backers in the BMEI. The way to win hearts and minds in the Middle East is not through talking to ageing and incompetent despots, or through fruitless exchanges with the Arab League. In fact, such exchanges might both mislead policy makers and further alienate the people who have lost patience both with the United States and its despotic friends. The region has its own emerging crop of credible leaders and democracy activists, who are more in tune with what the people want. It is to these leaders that the message must be directed, and it is they who need convincing that the United States is serious about change.

Finally, the bottom line in all this is not to remain fixated on the old ways of short-term accommodation and expedient arrangements that put short-term U.S. interests above everything else. What is at issue here is the search for a new and genuine partnership between the American people and the peoples of the Middle East on the basis of shared values and common interests. Such partnership will need much more than aid-centered initiatives and mere talk. It needs a solid foundation of mutual understanding that in turn requires a serious and forthright dialogue. It is high time we started somewhere.

166 Walker, "Some ideas for better U.S.-Arab dialogues," The Daily Star.

THE BROOKINGS PROJECT ON U.S. POLICY TOWARDS THE ISLAMIC WORLD

The Brookings Project on U.S. Policy Towards the Islamic World is a major research program, housed under the auspices of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy. It is designed to respond to some of the profound questions that the terrorist attacks of September 11th have raised for U.S. policy. In particular, it seeks to examine how the United States can reconcile its need to eliminate terrorism and reduce the appeal of extremist movements with its need to build more positive relations with Muslim states and communities.

The Project has several interlocking components:

- The U.S.-Islamic World Forum, which brings together American and Muslim world leaders from the fields of politics, business, media, academia, and civil society, for much-needed discussion and dialogue,
- A Washington Task Force made up of specialists in Islamic, regional, and foreign policy issues (emphasizing diversity in viewpoint and geographic expertise), as well as U.S. government policymakers, which meets on a regular basis to discuss, analyze, and information share on relevant trends and issues,
- A Visiting Fellows program that brings distinguished experts from the Islamic world to spend time at Brookings, both assisting them in their own research, as well as informing the work ongoing in the Project and the wider DC policymaking community,

- A series of Brookings Analysis Papers and Monographs that provide needed analysis of the vital issues of joint concern between the U.S. and the Islamic world,
- An Education and Economic Outreach Initiative, which will explore the issues of education reform and economic development towards the Islamic world, in particular the potential role of the private sector,
- A Science and Technology Policy Initiative, which looks at the role that cooperative science and technology programs involving the U.S. and Muslim world can play in responding to regional development and education needs, and in fostering positive relations, and
- A Brookings Institution Press Book Series, which will explore U.S. policy options towards the Islamic World. The aim of the book series is to synthesize the project's findings for public dissemination.

The underlying aim of the Project is to continue the Brookings Institution's original mandate to serve as a bridge between scholarship and public policy. It seeks to bring new knowledge to the attention of decision-makers and opinion-leaders, as well as afford scholars, analysts, and the public a better insight into public policy issues. The Project Convenors are Professor Stephen Cohen, Ambassador Martin Indyk, and Professor Shibley Telhami. Dr. Peter W. Singer serves as the Project Director. For further information: www.brook.edu/fp/research/projects/islam/islam.htm.

THE SABAN CENTER FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

The Saban Center for Middle East Policy was established on May 13th, 2002 with an inaugural address by His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan. The creation of the Saban Center reflects the Brookings Institution's commitment to expand dramatically its research and analysis of Middle East policy issues at a time when the region has come to dominate the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

The Saban Center provides Washington policymakers with balanced, objective, in-depth and timely research and policy analysis from experienced and knowledgeable scholars who can bring fresh perspectives to bear on the critical problems of the Middle East. The center upholds the Brookings tradition of being open to a broad range of views. The Saban Center's central objective is to advance understanding of developments in the Middle East through policy-relevant scholarship and debate.

The center's foundation was made possible by a generous grant from Haim and Cheryl Saban of Los Angeles. Ambassador Martin S. Indyk, Senior Fellow in Foreign Policy Studies, is the Director of the Saban Center. Kenneth M. Pollack is the center's Director of Research. Joining them is a core group of Middle East experts who conduct original research and develop innovative programs to promote a better understanding of the policy choices facing American decision makers in the Middle East. They include Tamara Cofman Wittes who is a specialist on political reform in the Arab world; Shibley Telhami who holds the Sadat Chair at the University of Maryland; Shaul Bakhash an expert on Iranian politics from George

Mason University; Daniel Byman from Georgetown University, a Middle East terrorism expert; and Flynt Leverett a former senior CIA analyst and Senior Director at the National Security Council who is a specialist on Syria and Lebanon. The center is located in the Foreign Policy Studies Program at Brookings, led by its Director and Brookings' Vice President, James B. Steinberg.

The Saban Center is undertaking path breaking research in five areas: the implications of regime change in Iraq, including post-war nation-building and Gulf security; the dynamics of Iranian domestic politics and the threat of nuclear proliferation; mechanisms and requirements for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; policy for the war against terrorism, including the continuing challenge of state-sponsorship of terrorism; and political and economic change in the Arab world, in particular in Syria and Lebanon, and the methods required to promote democratization.

The center also houses the ongoing *Brookings Project* on U.S. Policy Towards the Islamic World which is generously funded by the State of Qatar and directed by Brookings Senior Fellow Peter W. Singer. The project focuses on analyzing the problems in the relationship between the United States and the Islamic world with the objective of developing effective policy responses. The Islamic World Project includes a task force of experts, an annual dialogue between American and Muslim intellectuals, a visiting fellows program for specialists from the Islamic world, and a monograph series.

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