

US Strategic Communications and Information Operations with the Muslim world:

By:

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After September 11th, the relationship between the US and the Muslim world suffered several setbacks. Many in the Muslim world interpreted the “War on Terror” as a war against Islam. In response, the US government tried in different ways to “Win the Hearts and Minds” of Muslims.

Attempts of the US to improve its image included the following:

- 1- Statements to emphasize that the war on terror is NOT a war against Islam.
- 2- Using expressions such as “Islam is the Religion of Peace” to improve relations with Muslims.
- 3- Media efforts to improve the US image in the Muslim world such as Hi Magazine, Al-Hurra TV, and Radio Sawa.
- 4- Addressing the Muslim world with specific speeches such as President Obama’ speech to the Muslim world in Cairo.
- 5- Expressing respect to Muslim leaders via gestures (e.g. The US president excessive bowing to the Saudi king to show respect).
- 6- US female diplomatic representatives Diplomats and military personnel to Muslim countries showing respect to Muslims by wearing the Hijab.
- 7- Supporting Muslims’ desire to build the mosque at ground Zero, encourage Muslim women to wear the Hijab, and to collect the Zakkat by Islamic organizations (Obligatory Islamic Tax for Muslim).

- 8- Standing against burning the Quran in Florida.
- 9- Celebrating with Muslims by inviting their representatives to Iftar dinner at the White House during Ramadan.
- 10- Avoiding using certain expressions such as the word “Jihad” or referring to the radical Islamic ideology as a cause for the problem of terrorism to appease ‘moderate’ Muslims.
- 11- Burying Bin Laden in an “Islamic” manner to show respect to the Muslim world.

The outcome of the previously mentioned approaches has been disappointing and the US image in the Muslim world has not improved in a significant way after using such approaches (See 1, 2, 3 below).

Weakness and Limitations of the formerly mentioned US approach includes:

- 1- Failure to create the proper and needed balance between showing respect to Muslims and being perceived as ‘weak’ in the Muslim world. The latter impedes the winning of hearts and minds strategies. Some of the previously mentioned approaches (such as the bowing of the US president to the Saudi king, the use of the Hijab by US female military personnel in Afghanistan and by US representatives) portrayed the US in a weak manner that could have impeded the ability of the US to improve its image, as the Muslim world prefers the strong rather than the weak friend.
- 2- Failure to understand that improving the image of the US in the Muslim world is more dependent on modifying the process of thinking and perception among Muslims than on merely changing US policies. Modifying the thinking process among Muslims needs proper support for effective education that encourages critical thinking and logical- rather than emotional-analysis within Islamic societies.
- 3- Lack of an effective counter messaging system to respond to negative rumors about the US that spread in the Muslim world.

- 4- Failure to recognize and address the role played by radical Islamic teachings in impeding the efforts to improve the US image in the Muslim world.
- 5- Insufficient utilization of Arab Americans to improve the US image in the Muslim world.
- 6- Failure to dissociate the US government from the US media in the mind of Islamic societies. Many Muslims in these societies judge US government by what is written or published in the US media. For example, if the media criticized or insulted Islam many in the Muslim world perceive it as if the US government is insulting Islam. Addressing this issue is fundamental to improving the effectiveness of “winning hearts and minds” strategies.
- 7- Lack of properly planned psychological operations to weaken radicalism in the Muslim world. Such operations MUST be done in a covert manner.

Recommendations to improve the US strategic communications (SC) and Information operations (IO) with the Muslim world:

1- SHARING COMMON HOPES AND DREAMS: Sharing common hopes and dreams of decreasing suffering all over the world can be achieved for example, via creating a common dream for both the Arabs, US, and the rest of the world to end poverty and cure disease. Being part of a bigger dream gives the Arabs a feeling of respect and encourages them to feel that they are inseparable and important part of the world community.

2- FIGHTING TERRORISM MUST BE PORTRAYED AS A JOINT EFFORT: Since the victims of terrorism are predominantly Muslims, fighting terrorism must be portrayed as a joint effort between the US and the Muslim world rather than a unilateral US approach.

3- RESPECTING THE ARAB WORLD, WITHOUT SHOWING WEAKNESS: This crucial balance is needed as showing respect to others is vital to win their hearts and minds but showing weakness encourage the Islamist radicals to do more violent acts.

4- REMOVING PAST OBSTACLES TO GOOD RELATIONS: Removing the obstacles that still exist from the past relationship is important. If these obstacles are not removed, they will always impede attempts to win the hearts and minds of the Arab world. Many of these obstacles are based on misconceptions. For example, many in the Arab world think that the U S treats the Arabs badly and discriminates against them. The use of facts to fight these misconceptions e.g. by sharing statistics to prove that the income/education of the Arab Americans is higher than average, can help remove this obstacle.

5- EMPATHY AND UNDERSTANDING: Showing empathy and understanding of the sufferings of young Arabs and desire to help relieve this suffering is one of the factors that can initiate a positive relationship with the US.

6- REDUCING MISUNDERSTANDING: Clarifying areas that causes misunderstandings and cause more hatred to the US. For example, many in the Arab world think that the US government has full control over the media and what is written in the books and magazines in the US. For this reason, they blame the US government for any book or comment in the media that insults Islam. Clarifying that the US government has NO control over such issues and that the statements of the Government never insulted Islam, can help build a new relationship where the US government is seen as responsible only for its statements and cannot be held responsible for what the media says. The latter issue is crucial as a lot of hatred to the US is because the people judge the US government by the actions of individuals or the media.

7- CLARIFYING ISSUES: Giving better explanations for US actions and positions. For example, one of the main obstacles to improve the relationship between the US and the Arab street is what Arabs describe as the Pro Israel US foreign policy. This issue can be better explained to the Arab street by clarifying that this position is NOT based on hatred to the Arabs but rather on a strong belief that the existence of Israel beside the Arabs in this area will be useful for both parties and will actually encourage economic growth to the whole area that will ultimately benefit the Arabs as

well. US support for Israel can be partially explained in the context that it is not based on hatred to the Arabs but in fact it is based on a better vision for the area and love (NOT hatred) for the Arabs as well.

8- SET HIGH STANDARDS: Set high expectations for the Arab and Muslim world. This is most important as the Arabs can do better when others set high expectations from them. For example, asking the Arabs to protect their Christian minorities will not be as effective as telling them that the world is not expecting from the Arab world anything less than being a role model to the world in caring for its religious minorities. Setting high expectations from the Arabs- rather than instructing them to do something- can be an excellent way to motivate them to be better.

9. QUOTING SELECTED ISLAMIC TEXT-A STRATEGIC

COMMUNICATION TOOL: The use of Quranic verses in the strategic communications with the Arab and Muslim world can on one hand show Muslims how the US respect the Islam and on the other hand can help to counterbalance the common believe in the Arab/Muslim world that the US hates Islam. Furthermore, this approach can encourage Muslims to apply the Quranic verses that promote tolerance to and peaceful co-existence with the others.

Using appropriate quotes from the Quran can help Muslims accept the U.S. interpretations of issues and events. For example, the following verse in the Quran “Verse 6:164:

“No one can be hold responsible for the actions of another.”

This reference can be used to help Muslims stop judging all the American people and hating them based on the actions of individuals (e.g. The Florida Pastor who burned the Quran) or groups that insult Islam in the US.

Osama Bin Laden recent death at the hands of U.S. Navy Seals provides another opportunity to quote the Quran to support U.S. Action: the Quran Verse 2:179 reads:

“In the Law of taking the life of murders there is (saving of) Life to you.”

10. GETTING CREDIT FOR DOING GOOD: A larger portion of US aid should be in the form of grants that can go directly to hands of people to create a direct positive relationship to the US. For example, in the early 1980s, US support for Egypt included chickens that were wrapped in bags with colors that looked like the US flag. This helped create a mental link between the good taste of the Chickens and the US and ultimately made many Egyptians at that time start to perceive the US in very positive manner. Creating such mental links to improve the image of the US is possible via the use of certain cognitive psychology tactics such as the 'Spreading Activation Model'.

Fighting in Brainistan

Effective "Mind War" strategies to weaken Islamic Radicalism MUST be added to the formerly mentioned approaches. Better use of the Internet to fight Radicalism in the Muslim world is also crucial element in this psychological war.

Understanding Islamic culture and types of Muslims is also vital to develop effective strategic communication approaches. A simplistic visual analysis of Islamic culture can be illustrated using five concentric circles that represent categories.

The outer circle consists of "cultural Muslims," who follow their religion in a somewhat superficial manner. They consider their religion a part of their culture, but do not necessarily read much about their faith or practice their religion actively. Islam simply forms a framework identity for the social activities they engage in or identify with.

The second circle is occupied by "ritual Muslims" that mainly practice the five pillars of Islam and are against violent edicts of Shariah laws (such as stoning for adultery and killing apostates).

The third circle represents "theological Muslims," who study in greater depth Islamic texts and are interested in implementing Shariah law to replace the secular law of the land. This group can represent a major threat to values of liberty and the stability of the free world once their percentage exceeds a certain threshold in the society.

The fourth circle represents "radical Muslims" who accept and promote using force to subjugate others to their beliefs.

The final and innermost smallest circle represents terrorists, who represent only a very small fraction of Islamic society but who are ready to sacrifice their lives to attack others and have the potential to do major harm.

Strategic communication efforts MUST be tailored and customized for each of the above mentioned groups.

Finally, The US needs to work at 3 levels to improve its strategic communication capabilities with the Muslim world

- 1- The message that they sent to the Muslim world.
- 2- Removing the obstacles (such as Radical Islamic Ideology) that prevent the effectiveness of the message.
- 3- Changing the perception of the Muslim world to the US message via education and psychological operations.

Defeating Islamist terrorism relies on our ability to win the war not only in Afghanistan and Pakistan but predominantly in "Brainistan" via effective Strategic Communications and Information Operations.

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