

Conflict Prevention and Resolution Forum: April 8, 2003
Bridging the Gap: America and the Muslim Middle East

Notes from the comments of Ambassador Christopher Ross,
Professor Shibley Telhami & Shamil Idriss.

Ambassador Christopher Ross began his remarks with the assertion that now more than ever there is a need to bridge the gap between the United States and the Muslim Middle East. For some, this means “improving the image” and “winning the hearts and minds”, but Ambassador Ross explained that this is far too simple. It is unrealistic for public diplomacy to create or re-shape policy. Public diplomacy serves to inform, engage, and to some extent, influence public opinion with the hope that the government will take this opinion into account when formulating policy.

Ambassador Ross explained that the US witnessed major problems with attitudes after September 11th, and over one year later, foreign opinion of the US is at an all time low. The US administration has accepted the fact that foreign opinion is an important phenomenon. Ambassador Ross explained that in the past, the need to engage with the outside world was not given high priority and public diplomacy suffered as a result. In the 1990’s, budgets, programs, and staffing were cut and information and cultural centers around the world were closed. As a result, when the need came for public diplomacy efforts after the attacks of September 11th, the US was unprepared. From that point, the US administration engaged in public diplomacy to do what it could to “inform, engage, and influence” public opinion in both the short and long term.

Efforts for the short-term included mobilizing current and former senior officials and Ambassadors, engaging in an unprecedented media campaign (including Arabic media networks) to explain US Policy in the “war on terrorism” and to counter misperceptions that this war is a “war against Islam”; and creating special coalition news centers to take advantage of the modern, 24-hour news cycle. A heavy emphasis has been placed on the use of television and video since Afghanistan, as viewers react less to words than to images. For example, Ambassador Ross argued that in the current war with Iraq, television is presenting two different wars. There is the war according to the US media and the war according to the Arab media, both of which are very different. The challenge is trying to balance the images on both sides. Ambassador Ross explained that US policy is rooted in US national interests and therefore there will always be differences between America and the Muslim Middle East. The task is to narrow those differences and find common ground.

Ambassador Ross described the Bush administration’s three long-term themes for public diplomacy:

1. To make a conscious effort to represent to the world, fundamental values shared between the US and Muslim and Arab populations – such as the high regard for family, religion and education.
2. To stress the role of participatory government and politics to create a system open to all sectors of society and respectful of human rights, in order to create a better life for people.
3. To stress the importance of education in creating a better future.

Ambassador Ross explained that the administration is working to attract a broader and younger audience with programs such as Radio SAWA that broadcast American and Arabic pop music. Other efforts include programs for Arab women engaged in politics, programs for Afghan teachers, and an Arabic language magazine for youth. Ambassador Ross stressed funding needs, as the current budget does not include an increase in funds for public diplomacy. Current programs are making due with the resources they have and there is now more interagency discussion as public diplomacy programs pull together. Other long-term goals include outreach to engage the business community in supporting public diplomacy, and to magnify resources by contacting former alumnae of State Department-funded exchange programs.

Professor Shibley Telhami began by observing that relations between America and the Middle East are undergoing one of the most profound crises ever experienced. He argued that we have to work to understand this crisis and come to grips with the challenges it creates. These challenges are not only between US and Muslim countries, but reflect an international crisis over global order. Professor Telhami explained that the situation in Iraq is perceived as going beyond simply Arab-US relations, Iraq, and the Middle East; it is a battle for the shape of the international system.

Professor Telhami stated that there is a growing resentment of America around the world in relation to US foreign policy. This resentment is not only found in US-Muslim relations, but rather the crisis is more profound. Professor Telhami explained that in the context of September 11th, the administration did well in projecting the attacks as terrorist attacks. Arab countries understood and tried to make the differentiation that the war on terrorism was not a war against Muslims. The administration presented the challenge as one “within” civilizations and debated issues of shared values. Nevertheless, while US rhetoric differentiated between terror, Muslims, and Arabs, the fight is increasingly seen to be against Muslims and Arabs specifically. We are witnessing evidence of this in the current context as even Turkey opposes the war in Iraq because of the perception that it is an attack on a Muslim country. In the US, more and more people view Arabs, Muslims, and Islam as the source of the problem and we are witnessing an increasing trend toward a clash of civilizations rhetorically.

The growing resentment of the US in the Middle East was illustrated in a Pew survey conducted in early March 2003. The survey showed that favorable views of the

US were the lowest ever recorded, with Saudi Arabia's favor at 4% and Morocco's at 6%. Those surveyed did not believe the war in Iraq to be about democracy or peace, but rather about oil and Israel. The majority of those surveyed felt that there will be less democracy, less peace, and more terrorism after the Iraq war. This public sentiment is pervasive across Arab and Muslim countries.

Professor Telhami argued that the real battle is within the US over efforts to re-shape foreign policy. Some view US foreign policy as misunderstood and advocate a strong role for the US to exercise its power to gain popularity, security, and to force change. Others believe that the run-up to the Iraq war was damaging and that the US should go back and create new relationships in the region and revive Arab and Israeli peace efforts to engage the support of moderates. Professor Telhami stated that this battle over US foreign policy will effect US relations with Muslim countries.

Professor Telhami described three short-term obstacles that will need to be addressed in working to bridge the gap between the US and the Muslim Middle East:

1. The Issue of Democracy: Professor Telhami described democracy to be worthy as an end in itself, particularly given fears that the dynamics of war and conflict will result in repression rather than democracy. The gap has widened between foreign governments and their constituents. As governments jump on the US bandwagon against the opinion of their citizens, this is resulting in an identity crisis as to what side these countries are truly on.
2. The Issue of Terrorism: Many believe that success in Iraq will result in less militancy in the region. Professor Telhami explained that this argument works to a point. Yes, governments will be frightened by US power, but the real threat emerging from militancy is not from Arab states but rather from militant groups and non-state actors. These groups now have a large pool of people that they can draw from.
3. The Arab-Israeli Peace Challenge: Professor Telhami argued that the Arab-Israeli conflict is the prism through which Arabs view the US and all other issues. While this prism can be distorting, it exists nonetheless. Any efforts to improve relations between the US and the Muslim Middle East will require addressing the Arab-Israeli peace process. This will entail a concentrated effort from the US as well as from those parties on the ground. Professor Telhami predicted that any US efforts for peace and improved relations will not succeed unless the Arab-Israeli conflict is made a priority in US foreign policy.

Shamil Idriss spoke about the role of non-governmental organizations in bridging the gap between the US and the Muslim Middle East. As an example, he highlighted the work of Search for Common Ground (SFCG), an NGO engaged in "action-oriented"

work to improve relations. Based on understanding gained from talking with SFCG's Muslim partners, Mr. Idriss argued that there is a crisis between the US and the Muslim Middle East and that this crisis has widened as a result of three events:

1. Divisions between Muslim countries and the US resulting from post-September 11th and the "war on terrorism".
2. The perception of the US role in the Arab-Israeli conflict as exacerbating the situation, given US support for Israel.
3. Lack of democracy in the Middle East.

Mr. Idriss explained that there are also divisions over how the Iraq war is viewed. US support for democracy is seen in Middle East as cynical and a tool for domination and hegemony. Part of this perception stems from the US role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and perceived US bias toward Israel. Even in Iran, the most pro-American country in the region, perceptions of democracy and history (US support of the Shah) color Iranian views of US democracy. Another source of this perception stems from inconsistencies within US foreign policy. For example, Saudi Arabia is a very strict Islamic society, far stricter than Iran, yet Saudi Arabia is a close US ally. Why are Iran and Egypt criticized and isolated while Saudi Arabia is not?

Mr. Idriss explained that perception is as important as reality, maybe even more so, because people act on perception. For example, the perception exists that if a country makes peace with Israel, provides oil at a reasonable cost, or addresses issues of terrorism, then that country will be supported by the US regardless of whether or not it is a democracy. The war in Iraq is taking place within this context as images seen in the media are feeding perceptions. There is a great deal of fear in the US about terrorism and of Muslim countries in this regard. Since the start of the war, Arab and US news stations have differed dramatically in their presentation of the conflict, shaping viewer's perceptions. This leaves the question of what impact this is having on perceptions and how this will effect the future of US-Middle Eastern relations.

Mr. Idriss argued that if another attack should take place in the US, those opposing the war in Iraq would say that this should have been expected given what the US is doing in Iraq. At the same time, those supporting the war would use another terrorist attack to defend the need to take action in Iraq. The same events affect people differently and people sometimes use such events to increase animosity between people.

What can the US government do about this? Mr. Idriss explained that it is more difficult for public diplomacy efforts to be credible and have a strong impact because people often think that the message does not address the real issue. There is also a limitation to what government can do. This opens the door for NGOs to support official efforts or prepare the context for these efforts – an essential role for NGOs.

It is important for NGOs to take a long-term view in addressing these issues, which is more difficult for governments concerned with political elections. NGOs must be prepared to be satisfied by incremental advances over many years. Mr. Idriss explained that NGOs and private foundations have been slow to act on the issue of bridging the gap between the US and the Muslim Middle East, but that this is an issue in strong need of engagement. While it can be difficult for NGOs to jump into the middle of a crisis, those organizations that do commit must remain engaged for the long-term.

Mr. Idriss discussed the importance of action-oriented projects and he emphasized that any effort to bridge the gap must be based on a real sense of mutuality. Mr. Idriss used the US-Iran Project at Search for Common Ground as an example, describing how the visit of the US wrestling team to Iran in 1998, the first such visit between Americans and Iranians since 1979, opened the door to many other exchanges between the US and Iran in areas of film, arts and culture, astronomy, and the environment. Wrestling worked because it was not political and rather it was an area where the US and Iran could engage together on an equal field. A second example of an action-oriented, long-term project is Search for Common Ground's Partnership in Humanity initiative to engage those working to foster cross-cultural dialogue. This network will aim to carry out a series of action-oriented activities that serve to improve understanding and build positive relationships between the Muslim world and the US.

While there are a number of exchanges between the US and Muslim countries in the Middle East, they tend to involve Americans going overseas to teach Muslims, and Muslims coming to the US to learn from Americans. This is only a geographical exchange and not based on principals of mutual reciprocity. Mr. Idriss concluded that it is important to look at what is culturally important in those countries that the US is trying to engage because a power balance always exists. Cultural exchanges between countries should be based on the premise that both sides have something to gain.