

The Role of American Foreign Policy in Encouraging Terrorism

Bernard I. Finel, PhD

February 1, 2007

In Brief

Negative perceptions of U.S. foreign policy are a major cause of anti-American terrorism.

Public diplomacy will be ineffective as long as the U.S. lacks credibility in the Muslim world.

The development of credible partners to communicate pro-American messages will require a toleration for criticism and dissent, which has, thus far, been lacking.

There is an on-going debate about the responsibility of American foreign policy in encouraging anti-American terror. On one hand, critics of American foreign policy claim that U.S. support for Israel and oppressive secular regimes in the Muslim world generates resentment and anger that strengthens radical movements like al Qaeda. Still others will point to the apparently devastating impact of the war in Iraq on perceptions of America abroad. On the other hand, some commentators deny this link, pointing out that the United States has played a more balanced role towards the Muslims than is often acknowledged, and point to actions such as humanitarian intervention in Somalia, support for Bosnian Muslims, and pressuring Israel to allow the formation of a Palestinian state.

In fact, there is good reason for skepticism about the claim that anti-American Jihadism is simply a response to American foreign policy. The Jihadists, for instance, claimed during the 1990s that the United States was occupying the holy sites of Mecca and Medina, when of course U.S. forces were nowhere near Mecca, had been invited into Saudi Arabia, and imposed upon themselves quite restrictive codes of conduct to avoid offending local norms. Furthermore, the Jihadist argument can be called into question by the seemingly opportunistic manner in which *cause celebres* are acquired and discarded in rapid succession. For American analysts, criticism of American policy has a certain baffling quality to it. It seems like a mixture of lies and misunderstandings. We simply do not recognize ourselves in the critiques of our enemies.

Our response to the claim that our foreign policy has generated violent anger has been two-fold.

First, we have adopted as a sort of mantra the call for more efforts in the realm of public diplomacy. Many American policymakers seem to feel that if we can only just get our message out there in a timely fashion, we can win over the “Arab street.” As a result, senior leaders have gone on “listening tours” that actually involve more talking than listening, and the U.S. military has sought to establish a rapid response function to answer charges and accusations made against the United States.

Second, we have chosen to demonize any group that refuses to “stay on message.” The U.S. assessment of Al Jazeera is a prime example. Al Jazeera is a western-style press organ in both the best and worst sense of the phrase. It is largely free and open. It is generally secular. And it is a commercial enterprise that likes conflict and controversy because that is what gets ratings. But because it refuses to promote the American perspective, many American leaders consider it almost an adjunct of al Qaeda, even though if an Islamist regime took over Qatar one of its first acts would certainly be to shut down Al Jazeera as we know it.

Our frustration over our inability to get our message out is a function of a misunderstanding of our position in the Muslim world. When Americans think about public diplomacy, the image we have in mind is of the Cold War, when Radio Free Europe and the Voice of America spread our message throughout the Eastern bloc and successfully undermined support for the Soviet Union. Unfortunately, in the current struggle, our problem is closer to that of the Soviet Union than that of the United States in the Cold War. We are the ones who are distrusted now. The rumors and conspiracy theories rampant in the Muslim world serve to undermine our message, much in the way that underground newspapers and subversive humor undermined Soviet efforts to control the message in their day. Structurally, today the United States is in the position of trying to win a war of ideas despite being distrusted and associated with illegitimate sources of information.

In a profound sense, the debate over the role of American foreign policy misses the crux of the problem. The problem is not the substance of American foreign policy, though clearly there are changes the United States could make that would be helpful – after all, we have often been willing to accept oppression in the name of stability, which is at best a short-term strategy. While we clearly had and have good intentions in Iraq, it is not a good model for future foreign policy decisions. The bigger problem is the one of perceptions, and the real challenge there is that we have no channels of communication with which to spread our message in a way that has a chance of being heard.

The United States does not need to speak louder or clearer. What the United States needs to do is find effective partners, who share at least some of our values, have legitimacy in the Muslim world, and are willing to make arguments on our behalf. They do not need to make arguments at our direction, nor do they need to always be on message. Indeed, any interlocutor with those traits would rapidly be branded a tool of American imperialism and lose all credibility. Unfortunately, our misguided perception that we are simply misunderstood makes us very intolerant of anything but direct repetition of our claims and positions.

Dr. Finel is a Senior Fellow at the American Security Project, a national security think tank. He has served on the faculty at the National War College and Georgetown University where he was also Executive Director of the Security Studies Program.

This Insight is based on research conducted by ASP’s research program “Securing America in the Age of Terror.” For supporting documentation, please see www.americansecurityproject.org.