

the War of Ideas through Community Development

BY JASON BEN-MEIR

RECEPTION OF THE United States in the Islamic world remains central in this great struggle for hearts and minds of the Muslim world. Western nations are competing with those religious proponents of that ideology seeks to impose a sense of life on Islamic countries, and is of whether that ideology reflects the views of the majority of the world. This could pit the two civilizations against each other with potentially disastrous global consequences. In 2003 the U.S. State Department's Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy called for a new direction "in this time of which hasn't yet been formulated" roughly half of the \$620 million for public diplomacy still supports cultural exchanges, which annually bring 35,000 people from around the world and all walks of life to the United States for important relationships and skill-building experiences. For beneficial these exchanges and other programs are, a dramatic change in direction is needed to significantly impact the war of ideas, or else the opportunity will be lost. A new strategic direction of U.S. public diplomacy ought to require that of delivering the message of the values of freedom and democracy translate into engaging people in socioeconomic development of

their communities. Words alone can no longer turn the tide of anti-Americanism that has swept across Muslim nations and is now deeply embedded in the hearts and minds of hundreds of millions of people. As Joseph Nye, dean of Harvard's School of Government, suggests, actions should be the communicator, which is louder and more genuine than words.

The basic principle of a new direction should lie in what former Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy Margaret Tutwiler did in 2003 when she was the United States' ambassador to Morocco and what the U.S. ambassador to Morocco did in 2005. They obtained funding from USAID for a project that rural Moroccan communities determined for themselves to be a top priority: fruit tree planting. The modest-sized projects were in the interest of the United States because it diversified rural incomes and helped to prevent urban migration in Morocco during free trade with the United States. However, the project's impact on public diplomacy was clear: tremendous good will was generated among the benefiting communities toward the United States because it funded a project that local communities designed and it acknowledged the development goals the public expressed.

Community participation in devel-

opment planning is a federalist democratic process that results in successful projects that meet the self-described needs of local people. This approach engenders in the beneficiaries a sense of partnership with those agencies that assist the projects' implementation. As such, it is a powerful form of public diplomacy.

For communities to determine their development goals requires trained local facilitators in participatory planning and consensus-building methods. Facilitators catalyze and help coordinate community development.

The public diplomacy apparatus of the United States ought to focus more on training people, such as teachers, in development facilitation skills in their own country. In addition, former Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy Charlotte Beers called American English teachers a "secret weapon" because they are needed everywhere in the world. Training teachers who serve in Muslim nations in the methods of facilitating participation in development will allow those teachers to assist local communities to achieve their goals. The Peace Corps should set an important example and train in development facilitation their 3,500 English teachers who volunteer around the world.

Films and videos of community meetings that are held across the

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Middle East and other Muslim countries, which show local people working together to improve their lives by creating projects funded by the United States, are very effective tools of public diplomacy. These films and videos are also helpful for training people in the skills that promote local development.

Of course, the United States needs to provide funding for the community projects that will come about through this new direction for public diplomacy. U.S. ambassadors should have an empowerment fund for local projects in the countries they serve, just as Thomas Riley, the current ambassador to Morocco, is creating. Ambassadors need to have more discretion on the funding of projects that further public diplomacy, as they are well positioned to know the projects that will make a difference for communities and will positively represent the United States.

As public trust is built through such projects, animosity will diminish. Furthermore, these efforts will offer the United States opportunities to explain its policies in the Middle East, particularly regarding Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, to more receptive audiences in the region. For this to happen, however, the United States needs to actualize its message to the world. It needs to explain by doing, which is to promote international development based on the desires of local people. Only then will the public diplomacy of the United States play an indispensable role in winning the war of ideas. ■

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