

PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

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President Bush signs an executive order creating a White House office to improve America's image abroad.

JIM LEHRER: President Bush signed an executive order today formalizing the role of the White House Office of Global Communications; it works to improve America's image abroad. Media correspondent Terence Smith reports now on the administration's larger efforts to reposition its "public diplomacy" campaign.

ANNOUNCER: Religious freedom here is something very important, and no one ever bothers us.

TERENCE SMITH: This television ad is selling life in America, not to attract tourists, but to export a positive image of the United States to the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Two competing interests

FAROOQ MUHAMMAD: My name is Farooq Muhammad. I'm a paramedic for the fire department of New York. I never got disrespected because I'm a Muslim. We're all brothers and sisters.

TERENCE SMITH: It features success stories of American Muslims.

SPOKESPERSON: It's nice to know that Americans are willing to understand more about Islam, and there is an opportunity for mutual understanding.

TERENCE SMITH: Former Madison Avenue advertising executive Charlotte Beers, now an undersecretary of state, is leading the \$15 million public diplomacy campaign. Brought into the administration in the wake of the September 11 attacks, she's attempting, in advertising terms, to re-brand America in the eyes of the Muslim world.

CHARLOTTE BEERS: We don't view it as an image change, because the connotation of image is difficult to measure and evaluate. What we are interested in doing is creating dialogue where there's been silence. And we are very interested in changing misperceptions.

SPOKESMAN: I was totally embraced by the people here, my professors, everybody told me, "Well, we're all immigrants here. We're all from different places, and we all meld together."

TERENCE SMITH: But the most visible part of the campaign, the ad aired during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, has fallen short of expectations. Only four countries-- Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Kuwait-- were willing to broadcast it on their state-run television channels.

Friendly countries like Egypt and Jordan have refused to run them on their state-run televisions.

CHARLOTTE BEERS: Well, in fact, they haven't said no officially. I'm not so sure that I can quote any one government, but if there has been a reluctance, it's probably based on the point that they consider it propaganda.

TERENCE SMITH: Nonetheless, Beers contends that millions of Muslims have seen the ad either on state-run networks or on independent Pan-Arab satellite television services. In addition, the public diplomacy campaign includes newspaper ads featuring a Muslim American schoolteacher, a fire department paramedic, a graduate student, a bakery owner, and the director of the National Institutes of Health. And a web site, opendialogue.org, encourages Arabs and Muslims to send comments and questions to American Muslims about America.

Many of the responses posted are positive, but this angry comment came from Aida in Indonesia, who was upset over U.S. policies towards the Palestinians and Iraqis. "Do you really want to build a better understanding between Americans and Muslims, or do you just want to win this campaign? We're not stupid or blind or deaf. We read your intention not by what you say, but what you do."

These booklets, entitled "Muslim Life in America," are another facet of the State Department effort. Published in ten languages, some 300,000 are being distributed by American embassies abroad. Additional programs include developing journalist exchanges, sending noted American writers, such as poet laureate Billy Collins, around the world, planning an Arabic youth magazine, and developing partnerships between "Sesame Street" and Arab television networks. It's an ambitious agenda, but not all experts on the region applaud it.

Changing perception of the U.S.

MAMOUN FANDY: The American campaign to inform the Muslim world about America has not only been just a failure, but it has contributed tremendously to anti-Americanism in the region.

TERENCE SMITH: Mamoun Fandy teaches at Georgetown University and writes a column that is syndicated in the Arab world. He served briefly as a consultant to the public diplomacy campaign, but now feels it has gone off course.

MAMOUN FANDY: I think this is wasted money. I mean, if any smart person thinking about this campaign should have thought about the audience: What do they like and what do they don't like? What is their intellectual temperament? The kind of... their habits of receiving of information and the timing of receiving information.

TERENCE SMITH: Mamoun Fandy is also critical of another government outreach effort, but says it offers some promise.

TERENCE SMITH: This is Radio Sawa, meaning "together." It is aimed at people under the age of 30-- some 60 percent of the Muslim and Arab populations. Its music-driven programming includes five- and ten-minute newscasts every hour, twenty-four hours a day from its Washington headquarters at the Voice of America. After ten months of broadcasts, the station, owned by the U.S. Government, is now number one among young people in the Jordanian capital of Amman. It claims high listenership as well in other countries where it's obtained licenses, such as Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Sawa officials say the service has a potential audience of some 250 million listeners in those countries and others, including Iraq, via satellite.

NORMAN PATTIZ: We have a saying on Radio Sawa, which is, "you listen to us and we'll listen to you."

TERENCE SMITH: Sawa is the brain child of Norman Pattiz, the chairman of Westwood One, the largest U.S. Radio network. He's a member of the broadcasting board of governors, which directs U.S. Government broadcasting overseas.

NORMAN PATTIZ: We're very different than the way U.S. International broadcasting has been traditionally. We don't talk at our audience. We need to... we want to create dialogue with our audience.

TERENCE SMITH: Mouafac Harb is the news director of Sawa, which has a staff of 150 people in Washington, the Middle East, and gulf region.

MOUAFAC HARB: There was a big hole in the market, and we isolated that hole. And we decided to appeal for the younger audience in the Arab world that no one else is doing it.

TERENCE SMITH: Bert Kleinman, a veteran of commercial radio programming, was recruited by Pattiz to create a novel format in the Arab world: Western and Arabic music together, or Sawa.

BERT KLEINMAN: Young people in the Middle East live in two cultures in a way. They have their past and they have their traditions, some of which are national, some of which are religious; and then they have their present and their future, a lot of which is connected with education, the 21st century, and in many ways, the West.

TERENCE SMITH: Kleinman says a new interactive feature, called Sawa chat, allows listeners across the middle east to express opinions.

BERT KLEINMAN: "Hi. I want to tell you that the Radio Sawa is the best of all, and I trust its news and like the songs. May our lord save America."

TERENCE SMITH: Mamoun Fandy liked the Radio Sawa idea when the NewsHour first played a demonstration tape for him in the fall of 2001. But after a recent visit to the region, he now says Sawa has some obstacles to overcome.

MAMOUN FANDY: The people I talk to who were probably 20s, 30s, some of them were... they liked the music very much, but they were not impressed by the news.

TERENCE SMITH: So the music may be hip but the news is not?

MAMOUN FANDY: Yes, the music is hip and the news is not, absolutely.

TERENCE SMITH: Mouafac Harb says Sawa is working on bridging that gap.

MOUAFAC HARB: We're adding more information, more news, more interactive with people, within the same format, the youth format, ready for the younger generation. We adapt to the market needs, and in times of crisis and interest in news, we expand the news coverage. And this is because we believe this is what people need right now. They want more information.

TERENCE SMITH: And Sawa is growing. It has four customized programming streams and plans for more. The Bush administration has requested close to \$22 million for Radio Sawa in fiscal 2003.

ANNOUNCER: Every hour, on the hour, MTN News helps you see and hear the context and meaning of events of the moment.

TERENCE SMITH: This is a demonstration tape for Norm Pattiz' newest venture: TV Sawa. If he has his way, Congress will provide \$65 million to fund it.

NORMAN PATTIZ: The success of government- controlled media as well as the services like al Jazeera certainly indicate that we need to engage in that medium. We think that it's important for the U.S. to have a

satellite television channel so that we can present our views and an image of America from our own lips and our own perspective, because I can assure you it's not being presented from that perspective throughout the region.

TERENCE SMITH: Mamoun Fandy is skeptical that an Arab audience will be any more receptive to a U.S.-Government sponsored television network.

MAMOUN FANDY: They are very suspicious of government or any government effort. And they are looking for American media to escape that. And the irony of this is that instead of getting independent American media, they will be getting another government talking to them, which is something that they will be running away from.

A problem in the U.S. foreign policy?

TERENCE SMITH: Moreover, Fandy says before any of the various public diplomacy efforts can work, the U.S. must address what many in the Arab and Muslim world see as the fundamental problem: American foreign policy.

MAMOUN FANDY: The Arab-Israeli question, we are perceived... all America is being perceived as not on the side of neutrality and peace but supporting Israel, right or wrong. There is no daylight of difference that they see between Israel and the United States.

CHARLOTTE BEERS: I completely disagree with people that the number one issue is the Israeli-Palestinian issue, though it is crucial. Several studies we've had back says, "What are the main concerns in your life?" And foreign policy ends up eight or nine. It's not surprising. It's intuitively obvious. But we communicate on many levels. If we weren't talking policy to the elite and the governments, we would be missing our first charter. But if we don't understand that people are concerned about their family, their health, and their faith, we would be missing an opportunity to have conversations on that level.

TERENCE SMITH: In the end, public diplomacy is just that: An attempt to open a conversation with the rest of the world about the United States and its values. It won't win any wars, but the Bush administration argues it is essential to any peace.

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