

NATIONAL CENTER FOR UNCONVENTIONAL THOUGHT

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QUICK LOOK REPORT ON THE SECOND CULTURAL SEMINAR ON ISLAMIC PERCEPTIONS

BACKGROUND. The subject seminar was conducted on 21 August 2002. Participants included citizens from Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Afghanistan, and American Arabs of Syrian and Palestinian backgrounds. The seminar was part of the ongoing PROJECT LINCOLNIA series sponsored by the Defense Department. The question asked was, “How does the Moslem world perceive the American message since September 11, 2001?”

DISCUSSION. There is no way to soft peddle the loud and clear message from the Arab-Islamic participants. They unanimously expressed the opinion that, until the U.S. is seen as an unbiased participant in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the U.S. message will be suspect at best. There are variations on this theme depending on gender and national origin, but the message is unambiguous. If there was a unifying theme to the seminar, it was that the Palestinian issue is the issue around which all else revolves.

ARAB PERCEPTIONS

- Palestinian participants stressed their perception of the dehumanizing aspects of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank.
- All other participants expressed sympathy for the Palestinians. This is not surprising given the passion of the moment. The only remedy for that perception is for the U.S. government to become active impartially in the peace process.
- It was fairly obvious that a huge cultural gap separates us from our Saudi allies. Wahabi customs are not well understood by Americans, and much of the American culture is offensive to the Saudi on the street. One participant said that the average Saudi is in denial regarding the extent of the involvement of their nationals in the 9-11 plot. The entire 9-11 situation apparently remains surreal to the majority of the Saudi public.
- Most of the participants stressed that the Islamic man on the street likes Americans while being opposed to U.S. government policies.
- The boycott of U.S. products overseas is well organized through the Internet and is spreading quickly. The boycott also includes a liquidation of assets (real estate, business interests, and sale of jointly owned businesses in the U.S.). These actions are opposed by the governments in the region, but are more pervasive than most Americans realize.
- Most ideas in the region are spread by satellite TV. Al Jazeera is particularly influential with CNN International next. The Internet is a huge influence among the young in more

developed countries. Newspapers are also influential, but word of mouth spread by religious utterances at prayer cannot be discounted.

- It would be an understatement to say that there was no “fire in the belly” for an Iraqi intervention on the part of the participants; most professed distaste for Saddam Hussein, but few saw him as a clear and present danger to U.S. national security.

AFGHANISTAN

- Most Afghans think that the \$5 billion pledged by donor nations will improve their quality of life. There is resentment among the population, though, that the funding pledged at the Tokyo summit was insufficient and has yet to show up in significant amounts. Afghans estimate it will take \$15 billion just to restore the infrastructure to a pre-Soviet intervention level, as opposed to the \$4.5 billion pledged at Tokyo. There is a real danger that there will be a crisis of expectations on the part of the average Afghan, which will erode any good will America currently enjoys.
- Currently, America maintains a reservoir of good will for its efforts in throwing out the Taliban, but we need to avoid being seen as an occupying power.
- Afghanistan is the world’s youngest democracy; there was a very spirited discussion among the participants as to how much “American” democracy can be translated into the Islamic world. The definition of democracy may become very culturally defined and segmented.
- The participants noted that American leaders appear to have been culturally “tone deaf” to civilian casualties in Afghanistan. As in many Middle Eastern and Asian cultures there is a distinct difference between an expression of condolence for a death and an admission of culpability. At the national level, we have failed to express condolence for several civilian deaths caused by U.S. actions. It should be noted that the U.S. Special Forces personnel have tried to rectify this at the local levels. It may be a good idea for the Pentagon to take a page from the “snake eater” notebook.
- The participants felt that we need to be much more sensitive to charges of cultural and military imperialism and arrogance. The rest of the world doesn’t necessarily see us the way we see ourselves.

CONCLUSIONS.

- The short- term prospects for a successful information campaign in the Arab world do not look bright.
- The Palestinian issue, and America’s position toward it, will make the official U.S. government position a hard sell. There will not likely be information campaign strategies that will change that perception. However, that does not mean that a balanced U.S. view of the conflict should not be presented. Crafting a balanced official view will likely precipitate a major policy debate given the internal passions within the government on the subject. This is not to indicate that it would be an unworthy effort, but it does realize the political reality.
- The potential for an information campaign that would support the U.S. position in Afghanistan while giving realistic expectations of what can be achieved has some promise. An approach of “here’s where we are now, and there is where we could be” could resonate. Given a clear and *achievable* goal with reasonable U.S. support, Karzai could become an Afghan JFK.

- American efforts to effect an Iraqi regime change currently have no support by the Arab man on the street. They don't believe us when we make a case for U.S. action, they see no current threat, and so they are generally confused about what we're talking about.
- The Arab-American and Moslem population in the U.S. is currently about ten million. They're becoming more politically active and will emerge as a force to be reckoned with. They have studied the techniques employed by the Jewish-American groups and can be expected to increase their lobbying, voter registration, and fund-raising efforts. Arab-Americans, many of them immigrants with great standing in their home countries, are an untapped resource in the campaign to make the U.S. message more attractive in the Moslem world. Participants pointed out that it is hard to get the Arab and Moslem points into Op-Ed pieces that will be accepted by editors.

RECOMMENDATIONS.

- The most lucrative target for the U.S. information campaign efforts in the Islamic world may be in Afghanistan. We appear to have a good story to tell if we use input from the Afghans themselves to help us craft the message.
- We need to be much more sensitive concerning the cultural aspects of non-combatant casualties caused by U.S. fire in places like Afghanistan than we have been in to date.
- Getting our side of the story out in the Arab world will be a much more difficult proposition than we thought.
- We need to view our message through the cultural mindset of the audience we're trying to reach. This isn't a standard PR problem and cannot be handled using typical Western and American outreach techniques.
- We need to listen to and consider the opinions of our friends in the Moslem world. They want to trust and cooperate with us, but we're not helping them.
- A good point of departure if the White House does stand up an information office to improve the U.S. image overseas may well be to attempt to include articles by Islamic Americans into the newspapers and on the air, even when those opinions don't always reflect government policy.