

**Ambassador Martin Indyk**  
**“The Elusive Art of Public Diplomacy”**  
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This is the second time I have had the opportunity to participate in the University of Utah’s Middle East Lecture Series, which is becoming renowned in Washington, DC. It’s a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak here again.

I don’t usually lecture on public diplomacy in the Middle East. I told Ibrahim Karawan that I could talk about a topic that may be called “The Elusive Art of Public Diplomacy in the Middle East.” But as you’ll see, public diplomacy in my mind is not the problem. In Washington DC some people are obsessed with this question: “What do we do about the fact that they hate us?” There is a huge amount of attention paid to this topic in the wake of 9/11, when we suddenly woke up and discovered that people have hated us so much that they would come over, hijack planes and then blow themselves up, taking the planes into the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon. Suddenly, we became aware that there must be some real hatred out there and there must be something to do about it and, hence, this focus on public diplomacy; that somehow we were not getting our message across effectively and that was the source of the problem.

This reminds me of when I was Ambassador in Israel. As you may know, Israel tends to have a public relations problem. And they were constantly asking the question, “Why is it that the world hates us now?” Sometimes they came up with this answer: it’s because we are Jewish and the world is anti-Semitic. But the rest of the time they figured it was a matter of public diplomacy. And if only they could get their public relations right everyone would start liking them. So they went to the fanciest advertising and PR agencies in New York and paid a lot of money to try to improve their image. But their public relations are still a problem.

Anyway, in Washington DC the concern about the failure of our public diplomacy spawned an incredible industry and an immense number of reports. There is the report of The Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim worlds, which is a good report and I recommend it to all of you. There is

the report of the Defense Science Board Task Force on Managed Information Dissemination. There's a report of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, not to be confused with the report of the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy. There's the report of an independent task force sponsored by the Counsel on Foreign Relations. There is a report by the U.S. General Accounting Office called U.S. Public Diplomacy. There's a report from the Center for the Study of the Presidency called Strengthening U.S./Muslim Communications. There is the report by the Heritage Foundation on How to Reinvigorate U.S. Public Diplomacy. And, of course, I am proud to say that the Saban Center at the Brookings Institution published two reports on this subject.

But in direct correlation with the proliferation of these reports, I'm sorry, I should say in reverse correlation, comes even more serious decline in our standing in the Arab world. So the answer of solving this problem with reports clearly is not working. Why? Well, first of all, I'll give you the kind of responses that have been generated by all of this focus on public opinion.

The first response is, there is something wrong with our public diplomacy; that somehow if we could just get the mechanisms right, reorganize government bureaucracy, have a cabinet level person in the White House responsible, integrate different agencies in some way and bring in some top public relations and advertising firms—somehow if we did that and set a television station, to compete with Arab satellite television stations—If we found a solution to this problem, things would be OK. This is not to say that all those things are unimportant. They can help on the margins. But the fact is, notwithstanding the 4 years since 9/11, our standing among the Arab public is worse than ever.

The second answer, which I'm sure you have heard a lot, is that the reason that we have such a problem in the Arab and Muslim world is U.S. failure to solve the Palestinian problem. And again, there's a certain truth to that. A grain of truth. In the sense that at a time when the Israelis and the Palestinians are at each other's throats and the Arab satellite television is broadcasting on a daily basis that Israeli tanks or helicopters are shooting at Palestinians, it certainly generates antagonism, not just toward Israel, but toward Israel's ally the U.S. And I don't think we helped ourselves by the fact that George Bush walked away

from any effort to resolve the Israeli/Palestinian conflict, and essentially stood back while violence has escalated. But, the opposite is not true. Because for eight years in the Clinton Administration, President Clinton, Secretary of State Christopher, then Secretary of State Albright, and the Peace Team, which I had the honor to be a part of, had devoted their hearts and souls and every waking hour to resolve the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. The President himself invested the prestige of his office by a huge amount of energy and resources into trying to solve this conflict. We got zero credit in the Arab world for doing that and just about zero support also. So, I feel somewhat burned by that experience and I remind Arab friends when they tell me “if only the US had solved the Palestinian problem, the hatred would have gone away,” that we tried, and the hatred was still there.

Why? I think because Arab animosity towards the United States comes from some other sources and I’ll talk about that in a moment, but I think it’s also important to understand that when we tried to resolve the Israeli/Palestinian problem, they didn’t like it, and they didn’t like it because inevitably if we’re going to resolve this problem by making peace between Israel and the Palestinians, there is going to be compromise, there’s going to be compromise on both sides. Not only would Israel have to make compromises, but also the Palestinians would have to compromise on certain issue-areas like their claim to a right of return for Palestinian refugees to Israel. However, when many Arabs talk about solving the Palestinian problem, they don’t mean compromising Palestinian rights. They mean achieving Palestinian rights. We can’t meet that standard. We shouldn’t want to meet that standard because that standard would in effect mean, one way or another, the destruction of Israel. And that’s not in our interests and that’s not something we are about to be part of. So, the act of solving the Palestinian problem doesn’t reduce the anger. In many ways it can increase the anger because we’re going to be pressing Israel to withdraw from the Palestinian territories and we’re going to be pressing the Palestinians to compromise on what they regard as sacred rights. Inherent in the whole proposition is a basic problem.

I want to spend a minute talking about a case study which I had a personal experience with while I was in the State Department as an Assistant Secretary of State, because I think it helps illustrate the nature of the problem and why we have such difficulties with our public diplomacy in the Middle East. The case is related to Iraq and to the policy that we were pursuing there at the time, for which some of you may know as the containment of Saddam. We used mandatory sanctions against Iraq, endorsed by the U.N. Security Council, as a way of containing Saddam Hussein and preventing him from threatening his neighbors again. The reason for those mandatory sanctions was because Saddam Hussein had invaded another Arab country, Kuwait, and had his soldiers there to rape and pillage and plunder another Arab country and people. Once he was thrown out of Kuwait, by the United States, leading an international coalition that included Arab states, and Kuwait was liberated, the U.N. Security Council imposed these sanctions so as to prevent him from doing that again. Arab public opinion should have been on our side. I mean this was a blatant act of aggression against another Arab country in which the Kuwaiti people suffered a great deal. We were the ones who liberated Kuwait from a dangerous dictator, who not only attacked a weaker neighbor, but also used chemical weapons against his own people. Once he came under sanctions, he continued to inflict immense hardships on his people. Massive repressive measures, particularly against the Shi'ites, as you know, were adopted to maintain himself in power after his Army had been defeated. While he was inflicting this repression on his people, he was building fancy palaces for himself and his family at the same time refusing to take advantage of the exception to the sanctions which allowed him to import food and medicine without restriction to meet the needs of his people.

We couldn't have had a better type of political foe in terms of a public relations and public diplomacy contest. Let's recall at that time, we were actively promoting a solution to the Palestinian problem, welcoming Yasser Arafat to the White House, President Clinton was embracing him together with Yitzhak Rabin and overseeing his return, triumphant return, to Gaza, and then he became the most frequent visitor to the White House in the Clinton years. So, you would think that these circumstances would have produced an appreciation for what we

were doing, support for what we were doing, in the Arab world. We weren't just embracing Arafat, we were engaging the Syrians in negotiations with the Secretary of State, making 26 trips to Damascus. The importance of all that is that Syria is the beating heart of Arabism, and we were trying to achieve a peace deal between Syria and Israel in which Golan Heights, the occupied Syrian territory, would have been returned to Assad.

So, we should have been supported in the Arab world. How was it possible that we lost the battle for Arab public opinion when it came to Iraq? Was it simply because our public diplomacy failed? Well, let me tell you, we didn't have any bureaucratic problems with public diplomacy in those days. We had Madeline Albright at the United Nations giving photographic presentations of Saddam Hussein's palaces and the things he was spending his money on instead of spending it on the Iraqi people. And we sent her around to every important capital in the world, to make the facts clear. We were being interviewed on *Al Jazeera* and other Arab television networks, making the case that the plight of the Iraqi people was the responsibility of Saddam Hussein, not the responsibility of the U.S. We published a great number of white papers with the evidence of all the things that Saddam Hussein was doing. But Saddam Hussein blamed the U.S. for the death of babies in Iraq. This was an effective means of countering our own campaign.

Recognizing that we were losing this battle, we responded with a resolution that has now become notorious, called the Oil for Food Resolution, which we introduced because of our concern that we were losing the public diplomacy war.

In essence, if Saddam was not going to provide for his own people, then the United Nations would, by allowing him to sell oil to buy food under U.N. control, and the United Nations would be responsible for holding the money that was generated by the sale of Iraqi oil and approving contracts for food and medicines and other vital supplies that would be distributed to Iraqis. That had advantages for our policy. It was responsible for building up Iraqi Kurdistan because the revenues went directly to the Kurds in northern Iraq and was used to pay for other things like reparations to Kuwaitis who suffered under Iraq's rule

and U.N. inspections. But most importantly, to provide for the needs of the Iraqi people. But the irony of this situation, as we know, was not only that Saddam found a way to take advantage of this arrangement to skim off billions of dollars for his own use, and to direct the contracts in a way that ensured that he could build his influence with key players. Even though we got a bounce for our public diplomacy from this resolution, it lasted only for about six months. Whereas he, not only got increased revenues for his own use, but established a system in which every Iraqi household became dependent on the food and medicines his regime was handing out as a result of this arrangement, through a voucher system. We managed to alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi people, and it made a significant difference over the years, but it made no difference to Arab public opinion. As far as the general view in the Arab world was concerned, sanctions were imposing a terrible toll on the Iraqis and we were unable to change that image. The reasons of that have to do with something more fundamental and they illustrate problems we have with public opinion in the Arab world.

First of all, there were some Arab attitudes against Kuwait. Even though they didn't like Saddam, they admired the way that he was standing up to the West; that, unlike the other Arab leaders who were basically our allies and seen as responding to U.S. demands, he was standing up and was appealing to Arab pride. This defiance of the West resonated, I think, with Arabs generally in a fundamental way, and it had little to do with Saddam. It had to do with the phenomenon that you probably heard a lot about, which is centuries of humiliation that the Arab world has felt as a result of its fate at the hands of the west that goes all the way back to the glorious days of Islam, but since then, it has just been a tale of humiliation and defeat upon humiliation and defeat, and that produced a general sense of defensiveness against the West, and against the United States since we represent the latest version of Western imperial presence in the Arab world. That is deeply ingrained and it cannot be expunged simply by sheer public diplomacy.

The second factor that played an important role, then and now, is the sense in the Arab world that when we engage in the Middle East, we pursue policies marked by double standards: One rule for the Arabs, another rule for

Israel or our friends in the Arab world. Sanctions on Iraq might have been accepted by the Arab world if there were parallel sanctions on Israel, because Israel has, in their view, nuclear weapons. It was their sense that somehow the Arab party in this situation is being singled out for different treatment. It was that an Arab country was under sanctions through U.N. Resolutions while Israel, i.e., America's favorite son, was not. And that was compounded by this sense of double standard within the Arab world. The United States was promoting democracy in much of the world, but when it came to the Middle East, there was this concept of Middle East exceptionalism. That is to say, when it came to our friends in the region, whether it was Saudi Arabia or President Mubarak in Egypt, we dropped the idea of democracy and, instead, backed authoritarian regimes that, in one way or another, were repressing their people. That, I think, was an important reason why we couldn't have won the battle.

The third reason was reality. Sanctions were inflicting big damage on the Iraqi economy and that was impacting the daily life of Iraqis. We blamed Saddam. We said all you have to do is to comply with the U.N. Security Council Resolutions, and the sanctions would come off, but most Arabs had blamed us because we were seen as responsible for the sanctions on Iraq and for maintaining them. Indeed it was our policy to contain Saddam Hussein by maintaining the sanctions. We couldn't change that reality. Try as we might to explain it, to spin it, as his responsibility rather than our responsibility, the fact that Iraq's people were suffering was something that we could not explain away. That's why we introduced the Oil for Food Resolution, to try to deal with the problem in a way that would enable us to maintain the sanctions. But that concern with public opinion led us to create a situation that undermined the sanctions and helped to strengthen Saddam. It also helped alleviate the plight of the Iraqi people, but although we might have changed reality, it was too late to change an entrenched perception.

So, what is to be done? I think public diplomacy is important, but it's also important to realize that public diplomacy, on its own, can only achieve limited objectives. Having worked in the State Department, I have seen the kinds of public diplomacy exercises that work well. For example, the Fulbright Programs,

in which bright students from all over the world, including the Arab and Muslim world, are brought to the U.S. on scholarships, to study. The cultural centers that we used to have in the Arab world that were shut down because of budgetary problems and because of security problems, were essential in terms of showing people in the Arab world what America was about. This very process of building people-to-people contacts, exposing Arabs to Americans in all sorts of ways, to our culture and values, was the kind of interaction that can do well for public diplomacy and can have good dividends over time. Unfortunately, in the post 9/11 world, the number of Arab students that want to or are able to come to the United States, has become limited because of Visa problems. Funding these kinds of programs has barely gone up. That's where, I think, we need to place some of our priorities.

We also need to recognize that our standing in the court of Arab public opinion is going to be low because of the structural factors, some of which I have mentioned. We are a hegemonic power. Just by that fact alone, we generate suspicion, and even antagonism. France and Germany can come with their culture, their cuisine, and the use of soft power, as it's referred to, and do well in these countries. But the United States has a big presence in their lives and we tend to get blamed for the things that go wrong because we are often backing the regimes that are responsible for what goes wrong, and often we'll get blamed anyway just because we are the hyperpower, as the French refer to us. Related to that factor, the Arab world has issues of its own that relate not much to what we have done, but the way in which we fit the pattern of the problems that they faced over centuries.

Those structural factors are exacerbated by our policies. Because the reality is, we're not going to abandon Israel and we are not going to abandon President Mubarak of Egypt, or Crown Prince Abdullah in Saudi Arabia for that matter. We'll have the president shake his finger at all of them in one way or another, whether it is Sharon or Mubarak or Crown Prince Abdullah, but bottom line is, we are not going to walk away from them just as we were not prepared to give up the sanctions on Iraq. We have interests of our own and are following policies in that part of the world because we have vital interests there that need to

be defended. In some way, there is certain inevitability to some tensions between the United States and the Arab world. We cannot abandon our policies if they're based on vital interests and core principles, if it's a matter of winning a beauty contest in the Arab world. It's not realistic to expect the US Administration, whether Democratic or Republican, will do that. It wouldn't be wise to do it. One of the lessons of the Iraq case study that I examined was that because we were fixated on the applause meter in the Arab world, we ended up doing things that undermined our interests. We have to recognize that all the advertising and packaging in the world will not succeed in selling people a product that they don't want to buy and there are parts of our product that they don't want to buy.

To conclude, I think there are things we can do in our public diplomacy that would make a difference. We can walk softly, and wield a big stick. President Clinton had an amazing ability to walk softly, empathize with the Arabs and Palestinians in particular and devoted a good deal of time to speaking to Arab audiences in that way. We need to listen and not just speak. That can buy us a lot and we don't do that very well. We need to lecture less and listen more. We should try to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict. I believe it's in our interest to do so, not because we'll win applause in the Arab world, but because this will serve our interests to end that conflict, and along the way, we will demonstrate our commitment to the rights of the Palestinians and the humanitarian solution to their problem, including the refugee problem. That will help, as I said, on the margins. It will help take the sting out of the antagonism. But I think more important than all that is something that President Bush is actually doing, and that is we need to remove this Middle East exceptionalism. We need to stand up for the rights of the individual. We consider that important in our country. It is the heart of our values and we need to make clear that we will stand up for the rights of Arab individuals. That means speaking in a clearer way, in a way that has an impact on the policies of our own friends, not just the policies of our enemies. The President is doing that, at least rhetorically.

But when we do that, we have to understand that there is a responsibility that comes with it. When we stop telling, as we are doing now, when we start signaling to the Lebanese people that they should stand up for their freedom

from Syria and start to do it, which is what they are starting to do now, we better be prepared to support them because we're challenging what Syria regards as its vital interests and there are consequences. And if we don't stand up for Ayman Nour, the leader of an opposition party in the Egyptian Parliament who was arrested on trumped up charges after the president's inauguration speech and before his State of the Union speech, if we don't stand up for those people who take us seriously when we say we're going to defend the rights of Arab individuals, we are going to find ourselves once again the subject of accusations of double standards and that will ultimately make the U.S. public diplomacy problem even more serious. I think most important, as I have suggested, is that we need to engage the Arab people, wherever possible, on every possible level because beneath the hatred, I believe, there is a deep admiration for our values and culture and we have to find a way of accentuating those things that some Arabs admire about the United States, as a way of helping to solve the problem. Thank you.