

Editorial

Geopolitics, Public Diplomacy and Soft Power

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As we have bid farewell to the George W. Bush administration, it seems highly appropriate to be publishing this special issue on geopolitics, public diplomacy, and ‘soft power’ with specific reference to the Middle East. In light of the ongoing ‘war on terror’ and the occupation of Iraq, attention has turned again to how countries such as the United States can use soft power to influence not only domestic communities but also countries in the Middle East and elsewhere. Inevitably, the role of the media, whether in the form of radio, television, or film, looms large in such debates. The United States, for example, has funded new radio stations such as Radio Farda and Radio Sawa in an attempt to influence Farsi- and Arabic-speaking audiences in Iran and the Arab world. The Middle East has, as a consequence of American geopolitical fears of both Islamist militancy and Iranian power projection, emerged as the critical space for such popular cultural expressions. In the context of the Middle East, geopolitical representations are rarely politically innocent.

It is now something of a *bien pensant* cliché to remark that the US-led ‘war on terror’ and successive rounds of accompanying public diplomacy did little to persuade skeptics in the West’ and the Middle East that the invasion of Iraq was legitimate and necessary (see, for example, Sands 2008). While few would defend the hideous nature of the Saddam Hussein regime, the manner in which so much US-led activity in the Middle East has been carried out has invited widespread opprobrium. Prison abuse, the use of torture, the undermining of the United Nations and the circumvention of international conventions regarding the treatment of prisoners are just some of the litany of complaints and grievances felt towards the very country which was at the heart of the creation of the United Nations and a new world order some sixty years ago (Sands 2004).

By the time this special issue appears in print, President Obama will have enjoyed his first hundred days in office. Whatever the outcome of his first administration, his election has been widely welcomed as a sign that the American electorate (or at least a proportion of those who voted) has been willing not only to elect the first African-American to the Oval Office but also to reject President Bush’s aggressive policies overseas. And it is possible, as Joseph Nye (2008: xi) noted before the 2008 presidential election, that Obama’s personal charisma may well be a very important part of rehabilitating America’s soft power. President Obama faces some tough challenges ranging from the fate of the international economic order to regional issues including the long-running Israeli-Palestinian dispute and the nature of Iran’s nuclear status within the region. On top of that, we would have to add policy-related challenges over the future stability of Iraq and Afghanistan alongside relations with other states such as Syria. Such is the expectation surrounding the Obama administration that he and his team, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, will inevitably disappoint supporters hoping for radical changes within a four- or even eight-year time frame.

One of the greatest obstacles facing the United States in the post-Bush era is its public reputation in the world and in particular the Middle East. The 'war on terror' has done incalculable damage to the reputation of the country, as a model liberal democracy committed to spreading liberal values around the world. Moreover, in the context of the Islamic world, its steadfast support for Israel is deeply troubling. The recent Israeli bombing of Gaza, following the bombardment of Lebanon in 2006, has provoked much anger worldwide. While mindful of the threat posed by rockets fired into Israel, the latter's armed forces stand accused of indulging in indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force. The United States' unwavering support for Israel in 2008 (let alone 2006) has not helped restore America's reputation in the Islamic world.

Repairing America's reputation in the Middle East, and the Islamic world more generally, will take time and a great deal of judicious public diplomacy. Fortunately, for President Obama, the last administration provided a great number of examples of how not to engage in efficacious public diplomacy. These include the so-called 2001-2 'Shared Values' campaign, which saw the Department of State embark on an initiative designed to show the world that Muslim Americans enjoyed a decent life in places like Dearborn, Michigan. Unfortunately, for most Muslim observers, their anger at America was not because of what was occurring in the Mid-West but in the West Bank. The decision to fund international broadcasting enterprises such as Radio Sawa and Al-Hurra television were less than successful not least because American-funded media channels enjoy little to no credibility with key audiences in Iran, Lebanon, and the wider Middle East. *Hi Magazine*, launched in 2003, and distributed in Lebanon, the West Bank, Gaza, and Jordan, was an Arabic language publication designed to present American society and its achievements, including those of American Muslims, in a positive light to the youths in the Middle East. It was suspended in 2005 (Alsultany 2007). What the Bush administration failed to understand is that public diplomacy primarily depends on the product being sold, rather than the method. The Obama administration therefore would not only need a dynamic public diplomacy, but also a change in foreign policy, in order to appeal to the peoples of the Middle East and the Islamic world.

However, soft power does not follow a one-directional flow and public diplomacy is not just the preserve of major states. Although the term was coined in the United States in 1965, and has frequently been associated with that country and state-funded institutions such as the United States Information Agency (Cull 2008), regional powers such as Israel and Iran have also devoted considerable resources to public diplomacy, as have non-state organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Communications technologies have provided unprecedented opportunities for non-state actors to establish their own radio and television channels. Establishing such channels is of importance for those actors as satellite television has been particularly significant in the Middle East, occupying the role of the region's primary medium.

Soft power is also not limited to the broadcast media. Cultural relationships are another way in which states engage with the people of other states. It is therefore important to examine relations both between actors in the Middle East and the 'West', and between different Middle East actors. In this context, this issue addresses a number of questions: What is the relationship between 'soft power' and 'hard power' and how is this relationship strategized and mediated in the context of the Middle East? What role do public diplomacy and soft power play in the contemporary Middle East? What is the

relationship between Middle Eastern popular cultures and American public diplomacy efforts? What do we know about the audiences of media outlets like Radio Sawa and Al-Hurra television? What are the rituals of resistance that accompany the consumption of their programs? How are geopolitical conflicts mediated and how does this impact communities outside of the Middle East who are connected with the region culturally and religiously?

This issue encloses eight contributions by scholars from the Middle East, Europe, and the United States which have addressed the questions above from different yet related angles. One of the key geopolitical relationships in the context of the questions posed in this issue is that between the United States and Israel. The reasons for the 'special' nature of this relationship include political, strategic, and economic goals such as supporting a democratic state surrounded by authoritarian governments. Cold War alliances also mattered as Arab states turned towards the Soviet Union for military and trade-related support. However, the cultural aspect of the US-Israeli relationship is a key element accounting for its endurance. Ever since this relationship was consolidated, during the Six Day War in 1967, it has endured regardless of whether a Democrat or a Republican was in office. Arguably, the relationship strengthened still further under the George W. Bush administration and perhaps this has as much to do with the electoral strength of evangelical Christians as with the much cited 'Israeli-Jewish Lobby'. One can therefore say with a degree of confidence that the recent election of Barack Obama as US President is not likely to cause a radical shift in US-Israeli relations. Elizabeth Stephens and Steve Morewood argue that what binds the two countries together is a sense of cultural similarity and values that translate into 'political kinship'. Implicit within that contention is that both countries are settler colonies strongly informed by their culturally specific senses of manifest destiny – in the case of the United States shaped by a rejection of the 'Old World' of Europe and in the case of Israel, emerging from the Holocaust.

Cultural relations are a key element of understanding international let alone trans-national relationships. Orthodox theories of geopolitics and International Relations (IR) have been slow to appreciate that the cultural dimension to world politics matters. Geopolitical relationships may be shaped as much by reasoned evaluations of political, economic, and strategic interests as they are by personal relations and ideological convictions. The US-Israel relationship is perhaps a case in point. The United States is frequently willing to abstain from United Nations resolutions hostile to Israel and to defend the country against international criticism in places like Gaza and Lebanon. In terms of repairing relations with the Middle East, this might seem counter-productive and even inimical to US strategic interests, especially when considered alongside anxieties about oil resources.

In the case of the Middle East, much attention vis-à-vis public diplomacy and soft power tends to focus on relations between the region and the 'West' in general, and the United States in particular. Most of the literature on public diplomacy concerns itself with the role the United States is playing in the region (and historically, with reference to the Vietnam War and the Cold War). This focus diverts attention from the soft power mechanisms operating on an intra-regional basis in the Middle East. One of the most intriguing cases in this respect is the Iranian-Syrian cultural relationship. In recent years Iran's profile has risen not only as a political and military backer of paramilitary groups

in the Arab world, but also as a regional political player with interests in Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq.

Iran has formed a strategic political alliance with Syria that serves the interests of both countries. However, it would be misleading to construct this alliance in the simple terms of state-state relations. As Nadia von Maltzahn shows in her article, the alliance also has a cultural diplomacy dimension largely instigated by Iran. Through the programs and publications of the Iranian Cultural Center in Damascus as well as through academic initiatives, Iran is taking a leading role in reaching out to the Syrian people with the imprimatur of the Syrian government. This power equation lends Iran a critical weight while perhaps attesting to its long-standing regional ambitions. It also begs the question whether Iran's cultural diplomacy efforts would be projected on a wider scale or not as Iran tries to reposition itself in global politics. Iranians do not forget that in 2002 they were branded part of an 'axis of evil' by President George W. Bush even though they supported the Northern Alliance, which helped to rout the Taliban in Afghanistan.

While Joseph Nye's focus on soft power has proven popular with academic and policy audiences alike, we should avoid thinking that it is something unique to the portfolios of state-based actors. Non-state organizations also engage in activities that can fall under this rubric, and in the Middle East, Hezbollah has been the leading paramilitary group in this respect. It has had a media bureau since its inception in the 1980s, and in recent years, it has expanded its communication activities to include different kinds of media messages to reach out to audiences across the Middle East and Islamic world and even beyond. But Hezbollah's media messages are also targeted at the Israeli state and Israeli audiences.

During the days of the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon, Hezbollah utilized its television station Al-Manar to directly disseminate messages to Israel as well as to frame its own anti-occupation resistance activities in heroic terms for audiences in Lebanon and outside. As such, Zahera Harb's article in this special issue examines Al-Manar's performance in the last two years of the Israeli occupation of South Lebanon as a media campaign with specific anti-occupation goals. We might conceive of Al-Manar as an 'anti-geopolitical' actor (Agnew 2003), which actively contests what it perceives to be dominant geopolitical representations of Hezbollah as a terrorist organization hell-bent on the destruction of the state of Israel. Al-Manar's coverage, while clearly not disinterested, is also intended to represent the realities of Israeli occupation and violence.

Al-Manar's accosting of Arab audiences is not unique. In the age of the war on terror, there has been a significant growth in the use of broadcasting as a public diplomacy tool. This growth is led by the United States, which established Al-Hurra television (shortly after launching Radio Sawa) in the early days of the war on Iraq in order to present the American point of view to audiences in the Arab world and to contest Al-Jazeera's dominance of the Arab airwaves. However, Al-Hurra has not been able to shake the position of Al-Jazeera or its main competitor Al-Arabiya. Scholars have contested Al-Hurra's ability to attract Arab audiences because of its association with the American government. Al-Hurra was seen as lacking credibility and as presenting views favorable to the US administration, rather than being the 'objective' news channel it claims to be. In this context, William Lafi Youmans examines the use of humor by both Al-Hurra employees and audiences as a response to the channel's workings. Youmans uses Joseph Nye's model of 'willing interpreters and receivers' as necessary components

for successful public diplomacy to show that in the case of Al-Hurra, neither is currently present. The channel is presented as one where the employees share nervous jokes about – among other things – its weak position in the Arab satellite television landscape and where the target audience often subjects it to ridicule.

Yet, most of what has been said and written about Al-Hurra's 'failure' is often backed by supposition rather than empirical evidence. Yasmine Dabbous and Khaled Nasser's article helps fill this gap by presenting findings of a study conducted among Lebanese university students about the viewership of Al-Hurra, its perceived credibility and the relationship between watching Al-Hurra and attitudes towards the United States. Dabbous and Nasser's article also adds another dimension to this issue by examining the differences in responses among Lebanon's three key religious groups, Muslims, Christians, and Druze, thereby underlining the diversity of audiences in the Arab world and the futility of addressing and perceiving them as one entity. This is particularly striking in the case of Lebanon but would apply elsewhere in the Middle East too.

This point is echoed in Omar El-Khairy's article on the use of American music of black origin, as a cultural diplomacy tool, to reach out to the 'youths' in the Middle East. El-Khairy argues that hip-hop acts as a cultural ambassador for the USA, creating an affinity between Middle Eastern youths and American culture that is mediated by a musical form associated with a minority group, which has struggled to gain emancipation and civil rights. Youths in the Middle East are more likely to identify with music of black origin due to cultural similarities (mainly revolving around experiences of marginalization, oppression, and liberation of sorts notwithstanding endemic racism and racial inequalities); however, the irony, highlighted in the article, is that this is a case of a music speaking of resistance being utilized to expand America's role as an 'empire'.

Sari Hanafi also builds on the idea of 'empire' in his article on the 2005 Danish cartoons controversy. He argues that both the Bush administration and Al-Qaida have 'sought to construct empires' that have, in the case of the neoconservatives, produced hegemonic cultural practices, which marginalize and exclude Muslims. The cartoons controversy is approached within this framework of the existence of a cultural hegemony. Hanafi takes the example of Muslim migrants in Europe as a group bearing the epistemic weight of this hegemony. The cartoons controversy was also driven by a global political context involving Israeli and American colonial practices in Palestine and Iraq respectively (Gregory 2004; Hussain 2007). Muslim migrants within Europe are a living example of the impossibility of separating issues of citizenship, multiculturalism, long-distance transnationalism, and foreign policy articulations. Hanafi's article thus reminds us of the porosity of cultural and geographical boundaries, and hints at the necessity of approaching the geopolitics of the Middle East today on a transnational scale.

Lerna Yanik focuses on a form of anti-geopolitical reversal and complements Hanafi's article well. Through examining the representations and responses to the Turkish film *Valley of the Wolves--Iraq*, she illustrates how alternative cinematic representations can resist the cultural-visual hegemony of empire using the same soft power tools employed by hegemonic powers. Cinema is one of the most established methods through which notions of American power are represented and disseminated. *Valley of the Wolves--Iraq* uses the generic conventions of the Hollywood action-thriller to present a distinctly Turkish interpretation of the conflict in Iraq, and Turkey's involvement therein. The sting in this tale is the manner in which the film reverses

dominant Hollywood representations in order to showcase the Americans as the villains. Turkish military personnel prevail over their American equivalent and this representation of Turkey not only highlights their status as a regional power in the Middle East but also stands in stark contrast to 'Western' representations of Turkey as America's unsinkable aircraft carrier in the region. Yanik's argument therefore takes us beyond debates on geopolitics and into an anti-geopolitics that is sensitive to the importance of popular cultural representations and the power of film to 'move' people in Turkey and beyond.

This special issue is thus an intervention that highlights *inter alia* the continued importance of the media and popular culture not only in shaping the international politics of the Middle East but also in refining orthodox theories of geopolitics and IR. The last eight years of the Bush administration have demonstrated not only that images and sound matter (think of Abu Ghraib and defiant cries of Allah Akbar for example) but also that public diplomacy and soft power are geopolitically and culturally shaped by events and personalities. A richer understanding of the international politics of the region would need to attend to these kinds of dimensions while acknowledging the significance of non-state actors and transnational communities and forces.

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