

Winning the hearts of Muslims?

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In an article published recently in the *Washington Post*, Robert Satloff, director for policy and strategic planning at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, faults the Bush administration for ignoring that the reason why “millions of Muslims dislike America is because of the alleged injustice of our policies on contentious issues such as terrorism, Iraq and Israel.” As such, attempts to win “the hearts and minds of the world's Muslims” by advertising American values instead of defending its foreign policies, he argues, are likely to be counter-productive (“Voices that Speak for (and against) Us,” December 1).

In this context Satloff mentions a State Department program that “sends U.S. specialists abroad or arranges for them to speak to foreign audiences via digital video conference.” Even though 1,600 such programs were completed (or are in the offing) since 9/11, he says, none deals with peace in the Middle East, “combating terrorism,” “weapons of mass destruction,” or “Iraq.” Not only that, but most of the speakers the State Department has picked to address foreign audiences either have “minimized the threat posed by bin Ladenism or criticized the Bush administration's anti-terror or Middle East policies.” (In the same way, many “of the scholars recruited to talk about Islam in America have soft-pedaled the threat from radical Islamists for years.”)

Among the speakers whose names Satloff cites is me. He finds it “stunning” that the State Department asked me to speak “via teleconference to Indian elites on ‘Women and Islam’” (an edited version of my talk was published in the *Daily Times* on August 27th.) “Apparently, no one at State [he says] checked her Web site, a collection of blame-America-first tirades.” While agreeing that speakers need not be “government surrogates, and [that] constructive critiques of U.S. policy should be tolerated,” Satloff nonetheless suggests that views like mine “lend succor to our enemies.” What is needed instead, he argues, are “robust expositions of our policies.” Thus, rather “than shy away from our policies, we should defend them.” As he puts it, “We need to explain our perceptions of ourselves and the world, not our views of their views of our views.”

Satloff's thesis that the government should pick people to represent it who see eye to eye with it is uncontroversial. As a strategy, it also would be more honest and effective for the administration to explain these policies to the people whose support it seeks to enlist, and also to confront the difficulties posed by its policies rather than ignoring them. But many of Satloff's other claims are troubling and need to be questioned.

First, even though he criticizes the Bush administration's policies, Satloff is heavy on strategy but light on policy himself. He is concerned only with how to defend policies and not with rethinking policies that people experience as unjust, even by his own—admittedly roundabout—admission (“the alleged injustice of our policies”). Second, and related to this, Satloff does not entertain the possibility that some policies may not be defensible no matter how forceful the oratory or self-righteous the chest-thumping.

Consider U.S. support for the sanctions against Iraq that are killing off an estimated 5,000 children a month. The best “explanation” any administration has been able to offer for this policy is to say that it is a price “we” are willing to pay to oust Saddam Hussain (as did former Secretary of State, Madeline Albright). To assume that the reason Muslims don’t support such policies is because the administration hasn’t done a good enough job of selling them seems naïve at best and deluded (and disrespectful to Muslims) at worst.

Equally importantly, the U.S. cannot resolve the problems created by its foreign policies simply by explaining “our perception of ourselves and the world” to Muslims. The problem isn’t that Muslims don’t understand American self-perceptions; rather, the problem is that they can’t understand why a people who, in principle, are committed to civil rights, freedom, and democracy so easily violate them in practice when it comes to others. More humane, just, and even-handed policies would win the hearts and minds of Muslims sooner than simply speaking out more robustly about “ourselves.”

And this brings me to who the “our” “us” and “we” are in Satloff’s terminology. Clearly, he is speaking of this administration and its supporters, but the manner in which he uses such terms makes it seem as if the administration and its supporters are “America.” It is, however, inappropriate to confuse a specific administration, even in a democracy, with the entire country. While such a collapse is quite common these days, it dishonestly represents principled opposition to certain official policies as anti-Americanism.

To take my own case, it is important to clarify two points (specially since the *Washington Post* has refused to print my rejoinder to Satloff because of my refusal to use the word “Koran” instead of Qur’an). First, the State Department did not recruit me to “speak on behalf of America overseas” but to discuss my book on the Qur’an with activists who, like me, are interested in egalitarian interpretations of Islam. Second, what I criticize is the ends-justifies-the means approach of this administration and its politics that strike me as dangerous and unsound. How that amounts to anti-Americanism is unclear to me.

One would have assumed that, as director of a think tank that has been formulating policy on the Middle East for years, Satloff was exceptionally well placed to offer helpful advice at this difficult time. He could, for instance, have recommended that the Bush administration be responsive to Muslim concerns about the deleterious effects of many of its policies rather than simply suggesting that “we” don’t need to explain “our views of their views of our views” but simply “our” views. Unfortunately, however, a more well-defined and audacious unilateralism is hardly the need of the hour and it may end up undermining the interests of all of “us” in the end.