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**The 9/11 Commission Recommendations on Public Diplomacy:**

**Defending Ideals and Defining the Message**

United States House Subcommittee on National Security, Emerging  
Threats and International Relations

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Chairman Shays and distinguished members of the subcommittee, I want to thank you for this opportunity to talk to you today about the 9/11 Commission report's recommendations on public diplomacy.

I'm glad that the Arab media is being included in the discussion of what should be done, instead of being excluded and blamed for bringing bad news. This hearing reflects a sincere attempt to diagnose the nature of the problem, instead of finding a scapegoat for the challenges the US faces today in the Middle East. And as they say, diagnosis is half the treatment.

Sometimes it's easier to talk about what is not the problem. There is a general misconception that the Arab media--and Al Jazeera in particular--is a major cause of the rising anti-American sentiment in the Arab and Muslim world. [By the way, there is an interesting parallel in that many Arabs and Muslims blame the US media for reinforcing anti-Islamic sentiment and negative perceptions of Arabs and Muslims.] But neither is the case. A recent Zogby International poll of 3,300 adult Arabs in six Arab countries shows that Arabs who have been to the US, who know Americans, or who have learned about the US from watching US television, are as angry with US foreign policy and have nearly as unfavorable attitudes towards the US as those who have no such direct experience. ("Don't Blame the Media," *Washington Watch*, August 16, 2004)

The work of Professor Shibley Telhami, of the University of Maryland, has also clearly shown that Arab media, exactly like the American media, is more market-driven than commonly understood, and that it does not shape opinion as much as it reflects it and responds to it. So

as most experts in the Arab world agree, the main problem is not the media; it is US foreign policy in the Middle East that is the main source and cause of anti-American sentiment in the region.

Unfortunately, post-9/11 US policies did not alleviate the existing problem, but instead exacerbated it. Before the invasion of Iraq, the US was criticized for its perceived role in supporting Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories. Now the US is widely perceived as itself the occupying power of yet another Arab-Muslim population, the Iraqis. The US has also been criticized in the Arab world for its business-as-usual policy with certain authoritarian Arab dictators, while promoting regime change in others.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq did nothing to change this view because the US is now seen as replacing defiant dictators with compliant, puppet regimes. All the efforts to improve US standing in the Muslim world, short of making policy changes, are unlikely to succeed. In fact, as the 9/11 commission report states, favorable ratings of the US have dramatically decreased in some Muslim countries. For example, the report says that favorable ratings for the US in Indonesia have gone from 61% to 15% since last summer. And by the way, Indonesia is not an Arabic-speaking country, so we can't blame it on Al Jazeera.

Today's hearing is titled "Defending Ideals and Defining the Message." Assuming that one of America's most cherished ideals is that of a non-government-controlled and independent press, how can you promote this ideal amongst Arabs using a government-sponsored, -funded, and -controlled medium such as Al-Hurra TV? You don't need to reinvent

the wheel by creating a new medium that is inherently compromised by its self-serving goals. To give you a good example, two years ago the Israeli government launched an Arabic-language television channel (Channel 33) in an attempt to convey its message to the Arab world. It was a complete failure, and they ended up going back to speaking through the Arab media outlets that already existed and that already had the trust of their viewers. It is worth noting here that Al Jazeera still routinely interviews Israeli officials and commentators.

As for “defining the message,” in this age of globalization, media proliferation, and the Internet, you can no longer distinguish between traditional and public diplomacy, nor can you distinguish between domestic and international discourses. Any remarks made in a press conference or in a congressional hearing, instantly reach the very audience you think you have time to tailor the message for. Rhetoric is instantly available and disseminated the second it is uttered, whether by a mullah speaking from a mosque in Tehran or by a decorated US general speaking from a church in small-town America. And we should remind ourselves that the airwaves are just as full of anti-Muslim sentiment as anti-American sentiment. I would also like to interject here that General Boyken’s anti-Islamic remarks were first broadcast by NBC and that the first photos of Abu Ghraib prison were broadcast by CBS, both US networks, not Arab.

In summary, given these inherent problems with the whole concept of a public diplomacy, it is understandable that it is difficult to keep the position of Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy filled. Not even the best advertising executive can help you market a product that serves you and not the consumer. If US policymakers are

confident that their policies in the Middle East are the right ones and don't need to be changed, then they should not be surprised at negative reaction to these policies. Just as US officials and policymakers make the rounds of US networks every Sunday in order to explain their policies to the American audience, they should do the same with the Arab networks. This kind of routine interaction with the already established and trusted Arab media will allow these officials to both explain the policies and instantly gauge reactions to them. This kind of engagement over the long term might lead to the positive changes so desperately needed on both sides.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.