Published on *USC Center on Public Diplomacy* (https://uscpublicdiplomacy.org)

Nov 04, 2016 by M. Ashraf Haidari

Public Diplomacy: Challenges and Opportunities for International Engagement in Afghanistan [1]

I had heard many good things about Wilton Park's conferences, and was finally able to participate in one entitled "Public Diplomacy: Meeting New Challenges" on October 7, 2008. The conference consisted of several sessions, including one on Afghanistan that generated much discussion by a number of publicly renowned diplomacy experts and practitioners from some of the countries with forces in Afghanistan. We discussed challenges and opportunities for public diplomacy in my country in the context of international stabilization and reconstruction efforts.

In my remarks, I pointed out three key opportunities for international engagement in Afghanistan that have been underutilized. I stated that no recent post-conflict intervention had enjoyed as much international goodwill and consensus as Afghanistan. Today, some 70 countries are providing assistance to rebuild Afghanistan, while forces from 40 nations participate in the NATO/ISAF to stabilize the country.

Secondly, our international partners understand that no peace operation is successful without popular support. Unlike other post-conflict situations, the international community hardly needed to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people upon re-engagement in the country seven years ago. In fact, the Afghan people played a key role in helping the Coalition forces overthrow the Taliban in less than two months. In the two years following the defeat of the Taliban, millions of Afghan refugees optimistically returned home in a show of support for international peace-building efforts and the new regime they helped establish in Afghanistan.

Finally, I pointed out that significant progress had been made with less international investment in the stabilization and reconstruction of Afghanistan over the past seven years. We have established the key institutions of a permanent government, and we have made considerable progress in rebuilding infrastructure, in expanding access to basic healthcare, and in providing education to an increasing number of Afghan girls and boys across the country.

I noted, however, that our international partners had been either unwilling or slow to capitalize on the above three strategic opportunities. Afghanistan's international partners have so far faltered on three key accounts to help secure the future of Afghanistan, and thereby serve their own national security interests.

First, they have been reluctant to provide the necessary level of aid resources to meet Afghanistan's basic reconstruction needs. Second, they have failed to coordinate their aid efforts with one another and with the Afghan state to ensure aid effectiveness. Finally, they have lacked an effective public diplomacy strategy to listen to the Afghan people and deliver

on their very basic expectations. At the same time, our partners have not done enough to educate their own publics on how their involvement in Afghanistan ensures their own citizens' security and prosperity in a dangerous world where security is globalized as much as prosperity.

Unfortunately, a lack of progress in each of the above key areas over the past seven years has allowed peace spoilers—particularly the Taliban—to fill the gap and destabilize Afghanistan. As far as engaging the Afghan people is concerned, I argued that the international community had so far lacked a unified and effective public diplomacy strategy that was well connected to sound policy and policy delivery, thus helping ensure continued popular support for international peace-building efforts in Afghanistan.

For example, the Afghan government has been unable to keep its promises to provide poor Afghan farmers with alternative livelihood assistance. In 2005, poppy cultivation declined 21% as a direct result of an effective public information campaign spearheaded by President Karzai, who persuaded poppy farmers to give up cultivation in return for alternative livelihood assistance. However, the farmers went back to poppy cultivation the following year when they did not receive the necessary level of aid resources from the international community. We are again seeing a decline in poppy cultivation – 19% over the past year, but this success could be reversed if we do not deliver an effective combination of carrots and sticks to aid poor farmers and to enforce law against high value drug traffickers.

I also discussed the rebuilding priorities of the Afghan government, stressing the importance of engaging the Afghan people and maintaining their support for realizing long-term peace and democracy in Afghanistan. In fact, we cannot afford to lose popular support in Afghanistan. Our partners must seize the opportunity to regain the lost ground by involving and empowering Afghans to take control over our country's reconstruction process. Our partners can and must use their influence and resources to reward competence and moderation while weakening potential peace spoilers. Such actions will ensure that Afghanistan will stand firmly on its own feet once our partners have left.

I proposed to the Wilton Park gathering that they consider hosting a follow-up conference, specifically focusing on the practice of public diplomacy by some 40 countries in Afghanistan. The key purpose of the conference would be to share best practices and lessons learned by our multinational partners, and to work towards a unified international public diplomacy strategy to engage the Afghan people constructively in helping them rebuild our country.