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The Obama Doctrine and Public Diplomacy

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President Barack Obama's May 23rd speech at the National Defense University has been cited primarily for its assertion that the war against Al Qaeda has largely been won and that methods for countering violent extremism will change. The President stated that the United States "cannot use force everywhere that a radical ideology takes root," and said that "the next element of our strategy involves addressing the underlying grievances and conflicts that feed extremism."

Doing this is not a military task. Addressing those grievances involves acknowledging that, except for zealots, the appeal of extremism tends to be rooted in economic inequities. There are many throughout the world who feel humiliated by not being able to find work or put food on the table for their families. That kind of frustration easily turns into anger that can be exploited by those who embrace violence.

In his NDU speech, Obama said that the United States must help other nations "modernize economies, upgrade education, and encourage entrepreneurship," and must "connect with people's hopes, and not simply their fears." In doing so, emphasis should be placed on establishing direct links to publics, rather than to their governments. That is the essence of public diplomacy.

The "public" element is important because delivering assistance in this way can help to strip away some of the perceptions of America that have taken root during the past decade. Public opinion analyst Shibley Telhami has reported that pervasive cynicism exists in the Arab world about American promotion of democracy, with such efforts seen as "a fig leaf for wars designed to control oil and help Israel." Even if the United States has the best of intentions in its work to improve people's lives, it must overcome a presumption that it has ulterior motives.

A strength of public diplomacy is its transparency. When a tech workshop for young entrepreneurs or an academic exchange takes place, people see exactly what they are getting. Their government is less likely to get in the way than would be the case with traditional government-to-government aid.

Secretary of State John Kerry has stressed the importance of economic development assistance in U.S. foreign policy, and public diplomacy mechanisms are the best way to ensure maximum results from such efforts. Obama referred to the cost-effective nature of aid when he said at NDU that "foreign assistance cannot be viewed as charity. It is fundamental to our national security. And it's fundamental to any sensible long-term strategy to battle extremism."

A part of the NDU speech that did not attract much attention was the President's comment that some extremists believe "that Islam is in conflict with the United States and the West, and that violence against Western targets, including civilians, is justified in pursuit of a larger cause." The President rightly asserted that "this ideology is based on a lie," but the lie has taken on a life of its own and must be debunked.

Successful public diplomacy directed toward the Muslim world must be firmly grounded in the recognition that Islam is a dominant factor in the daily life of hundreds of millions of people and in the public sphere of many countries. The concept of church-state separation, which is so important in America's constitutional system, is unacceptable to many Muslims, and that belief – not American domestic issues – should be determinative in deciding religion's role in U.S. public diplomacy. Public diplomats working with Muslim publics should be knowledgeable about the Qur'an and tenets of Islamic faith and they should understand how Islam is interwoven with many Muslims' worldview.

President Obama's NDU speech does not mark the end of the struggle against terrorism, but rather puts new emphasis on remedying the discontent that nurtures extremism. That is a task for which public diplomacy is well suited, but only if public diplomacy is pursued in a sophisticated and thoughtful way, and if it is accorded a more significant role in U.S. foreign policy.