

Nov 04, 2016 by *Gordon Robison*

Person-to-Person ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

During the night American forces attacked a house in Fallujah killing, by most accounts, around 60 people. The Coalition Press Information Center in Baghdad, as it usually does, reported that the house was a meeting place for "terrorists", a term it used to embrace all of the dead. Just as predictably local residents claimed many of the people in the house had been women and children.

It is impossible to say where the truth lies between these two extremes (which are not, in fact, mutually exclusive). What is easy to see is that the United States has a problem in this part of the world where incidents like these are concerned. There has been a lot of talk in Washington about the need to improve America's public diplomacy activities throughout the Muslim world, about the need to do a better job of explaining ourselves, and our motives. How do you explain Fallujah? Or today's two Baghdad car bombs?

Better to ask how you get anyone to even want to listen to the explanation.

Public diplomacy is built on a foundation of credibility. Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty and the Voice of America, three of the Cold War era's most visible public diplomacy assets, were successful in getting their message across to people in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union because there was a tendency among people there to accord the United States a degree of trust as a messenger. Al-Hurra, the US-government run Arabic-language news channel launched last February, has failed to make significant inroads with Middle Eastern viewers precisely because there is a tendency these days to disbelieve (not just discount – disbelieve) anything the US government says. Maybe the house in Fallujah was filled with bloodthirsty terrorists... but it is difficult to imagine any form of evidence that would convince most Arab TV viewers that was the case.

Surveying this grim scene from Amman there is only one real bright spot to cling to for those interested in doing a better job of selling 'brand America': public support here for US policy, according to recent polls, is in the low single digits, but Jordanians remain reluctant to take their frustration out on individual Americans (of whom there are quite a lot in town these days, many on their way to or from Iraq). People who would never listen to a statement from the US government will politely hear out an individual.

The most effective public diplomacy efforts may, in fact, prove to be private people-to-people initiatives, or at least efforts that do not come with a US government label attached. Making people love America is probably not a realistic near-term goal in this part of the world. Helping people understand is easier in a place, like this, where people are apt to separate the actions of individuals from those of their government (something, I might add, that we Americans have never been all that good at.)

