

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gordon Robison](#)

Loyalty & Public Diplomacy ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

I'd hate to be a US official working on public diplomacy issues in the Middle East these days. Promoting American values and policy. Convincing a skeptical audience that the United States is not an evil, imperial power. How is one supposed to do these things when the bosses back in Washington seem hell-bent on undermining those sentiments in the interest of short-term political gain, or simple bloody-minded payback?

The latest case in point is the Third Arab Human Development Report. The document was commissioned by the United Nations Development Program. As the name implies it is part of a series of studies. The first two reports were ground-breaking events: hard looks at the region's economic and political shortcomings compiled by some of the Arab world's most eminent scholars. The Greater Middle East Initiative -- Washington's controversial attempt to revamp aid activities to promote democracy, good governance, women's rights and educational reform throughout the region -- was drafted with the findings of those first two reports in mind. Indeed, a much criticized GMEI draft that leaked out last winter cited the findings of the earlier Arab Human Development Reports to support its contention that the region is badly in need of help.

The Third Report was supposed to have been released several months ago, but last week Thomas Freidman revealed in the New York Times that Washington has held up publication because the report criticizes US policy toward Iraq and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This allegation was confirmed yesterday by the report's chief author, Nader Farghani, who told AFP that Washington has threatened to reduce significantly its funding of UNDP if the report is published in its present form.

Foreign policy, particularly its public diplomacy aspect, is supposed to be about the art of persuasion. Our current approach, however, more closely resembles the sort of winner-take-all political atmosphere that currently dominates on Capitol Hill. The results may make someone in Washington feel good about 'winning', but out here in the field they can only be described as self-defeating. Do we really expect anyone to listen to our public message when we also leave the distinct impression that we will not tolerate criticism?

Surveying this mess the respected editor and columnist Rami Khouri wrote this week, "For the US government to speak of promoting Arab liberty, on the one hand, while using financial blackmail to squash this exercise of free-thinking Arab activism, on the other, is a sign of precisely Washington's double standards, presumptuous arrogance, and pro-Israeli bias that cause so many people in the Middle East -- and the rest of the world -- to criticize the US these days."

Here in the Middle East all of this is easily linked in the public mind to another story that received relatively little play in the US: the reports that the administration eavesdropped on

conversations by Mohammed El-Bareidi, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency in an effort to find information that would discredit him. The administration allegedly wanted to discredit El-Bareidi because he has not fully backed the ever-harder line it is taking against Iran. Since El-Bareidi is Egyptian and a Muslim the alleged snooping becomes simply another slight against the region. Further proof that getting their way is the only thing that really matters to people in Washington.

The administration, apparently, did not find any usable dirt on El-Bareidi. As for the Human Development Report, it will be published, but under the names of its authors rather than as an official UNDP document.

Perhaps Washington does want something more than loyalty and uncritical support from the rest of the world. In the wake of these two incidents, however, the rest of the world could be forgiven for reaching the opposite conclusion. In the end, it will be seen as further evidence that the United States is out to dominate the Islamic world.

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