Public Diplomacy and the American Fortress Embassy: Balancing Mission and Security

By Mieczysław P. Boduszyński

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By Mieczysław P. Boduszyński

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Abstract

The present study considers the imbalance between mission and security at "high threat" U.S. diplomatic posts, and its negative effects on the mission and conduct of American public diplomacy. U.S. Embassies have been targets for almost as long as they have existed, and security has always been a necessary part of their operations. In this study, however, I argue that a culture of extreme risk aversion at "fortress embassies" has hampered the ability of the State Department to effectively carry out public diplomacy programs in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. This, in turn, harms larger U.S. foreign policy objectives in these critical diplomatic postings in numerous ways. I conclude the study with a set of policy proposals designed to improve the balance between mission and security at high-threat posts, thereby unleashing the potential of public diplomacy to work in the service of U.S. foreign policy goals. I draw on my experience working at high-threat posts as a former public diplomacy practitioner, and in addition I include interviews and discussions with other current and former U.S. Foreign Service Officers who have experience conducting public diplomacy at fortress embassies.

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I. Introduction:

U.S. Embassy Securitization and the Decline of American Diplomacy

I first proposed this project to CPD as part of my application for a Research Fellowship in the fall of 2016. Since then, U.S. public diplomacy, and U.S. diplomacy more generally, has confronted a set of unprecedented and well-documented challenges, including a U.S. president who expresses contempt for the institutions, norms and tools of diplomacy. State Department public diplomacy professionals, especially those working in media and communications, have been forced to interpret for foreign publics official statements, tweets and policies that chip away at America's soft power and standing in the world. Meanwhile, under the leadership of former Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the State Department reeled under a crippling hiring and budget

freeze as well as the early retirements—some forced—of a large number of senior diplomats.

With this in mind, the consumers of this study may be forgiven for asking: "Are there not more important topics to tackle than embassy security and its effect on the mission and tradecraft of public diplomacy?"

The answer is that the securitization of U.S. diplomatic missions around the world remains a significant, even growing, challenge. Indeed, it is part of a larger phenomenon, one that preceded the Trump administration, namely, the undermining of State Department influence and the militarization of U.S. diplomacy in the post-Cold War era, poignantly documented in the journalist Ronan Farrow's recent book, *War on Peace*.[1] These are realities that will outlast the Trump administration, and thus need to remain part of the discussion if America and Americans truly believe that diplomacy and public diplomacy should remain a central part of the national security toolkit.

The post-Cold War securitization of U.S. diplomacy was exacerbated by severe budget cuts and hiring freezes in the 1990s. Among the victims of these cuts were the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), the public diplomacy arm of the U.S. government, and eventually the libraries and cultural centers USIA administered around the world (USIA was absorbed into the State Department in 1999).[2]

While diplomatic resources were gradually increased after 9/11, the rise of a "Global War on Terror" as a central preoccupation of U.S. foreign policy meant that the State Department more frequently operated in the shadow of the Department of Defense (DoD) and the Intelligence Community. The influence and resources of the latter two institutions grew exponentially as they took on a leading role in the overt and covert dimensions of the ever-expanding

war on terror. In warzones like Iraq and Afghanistan, the DoD took on functions that resembled those traditionally carried out by State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) diplomats:[3] the distribution of assistance, information and media programs, and various outreach initiatives.

The securitization of U.S. embassies simultaneously reflected and enhanced such trends. Fortified embassies had already been part of the U.S. diplomatic landscape before 9/11. The 1985 "Inman Report,"[4] commissioned as part of the response to the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, Lebanon in 1983 (which killed 63 people), recommended that U.S. embassies be relocated to or constructed on sites of at least 10-15 acres, rendering their presence in urban centers nearly impossible. The Inman Report had observed that while "being on the busiest or most fashionable street or corner may have been an asset in earlier days," now it was a "liability."[5] In the late 1980s, a "no double standard" policy was adopted, leading to greater public scrutiny of embassy security decision-making. In line with this new policy, U.S. embassies were required to share intelligence on possible threats with the American citizen community and broader world.

Retired Senior Foreign Service Officer James Bullock, who specialized in public diplomacy, told me that while serious threats were present during the 1980s and 1990s at posts such as Baghdad, Cairo, Moscow and Tunis,[6] the approach to security was entirely different at that time. A zero-risk policy did not prevail, and public diplomacy practitioners had the autonomy to make judgments about how to safely fulfill their missions. Bullock recounted that even while on a temporary assignment in Beirut after the 1983 embassy bombing, he was still able to drive himself around to conduct public diplomacy activities. Certainly, there were restrictions and protocols, but mission goals and

security requirements maintained a healthy balance. Bullock recalled an Embassy Diplomatic Security official who said, "My job isn't just security—it's to help you get *your* job done well in safety." Then, Bullock noted, "Everyone understood that being secure, by itself, could never be any mission's primary goal." Now, Bullock is "not sure we all share that consensus anymore."[7]

The 1998 bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998 (which killed 220 people and injured 4,000 others), events that introduced the broader American public to al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden, led to the convening of an Accountability Review Board. Among other things, the board concluded that "unless State addressed security vulnerabilities at U.S. embassies, U.S. government employees would remain at risk from terrorist activity."[8] As a direct consequence of this report, in 1999 State launched its multiple-year Capital Security Construction Program. Administered by the Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations (OBO), this program has been allocated a total of $21 billion since its inception.[9] New and stricter security requirements for U.S. embassies have been implemented, including security perimeters, blast walls, sealed windows and arduous access and screening procedures through multiple layers of security.

Occasionally, ambassadors and their diplomatic colleagues were able to successfully resist the directive to move ambassadors' residences, embassies and consulates outside of urban areas, but the trend was clear.[10] A number of new U.S. embassy facilities, even those in "safe" European capital cities such as Zagreb, Croatia, were constructed as large, heavily fortified compounds far from historical and business centers.

As the journalist Henry Grabar wrote, "The disadvantage of far-off locations where land was cheap was not merely a

symbolic retreat from power and presence in the space of the city."[11] The placement of American embassies and consulates far from city centers also represented a withdrawal from engagement, one that adversely affected the ability of U.S. diplomats to effectively conduct public diplomacy.

While the end of the Cold War helped precipitate the closure of cultural centers run by the U.S. Information Agency (USIA)—and the eventual abolishment of the USIA itself—securitization also helped to prevent their revival after 9/11. Cultural centers might have served as a counterbalance to isolated embassies. Formerly, USIA sponsored a rich network of American libraries and cultural resource centers situated outside the embassy. U.S. diplomats staffed these centers, which welcomed public access.

However, after the 1998 bombings, U.S. diplomats were no longer permitted to work outside secure embassy buildings, making public access all but impossible. Even when such centers were outsourced to private firms and staffed entirely by locals, security officials noted the risks posed by any branding which associated the center with the U.S. government, making it a soft target for terrorist attacks. In a few cases, U.S. embassies employed creative approaches to open cultural centers with easy public access, such as the much-heralded @America center located at the Pacific Place Mall in Jakarta, Indonesia.[12] But successes in opening venues for regular U.S. public diplomacy outreach and programming have been very much the exception rather than the rule.

As a consequence, American public diplomacy was deprived of a major and effective tool of influence and engagement. While youth in cities from Cairo to Moscow continued to flock to the *Instituto Italiano di Cultura*, the *Alliance Francaise* or the British Council, the U.S. could only offer "American Corners," sections of local libraries and

other public spaces devoted to U.S. cultural and information outreach. With limited resources, poor oversight and irregular programming, these corners are ultimately an inadequate substitute for the libraries and cultural centers of the Cold War era.

II. The Rise and Anatomy of the Fortress Embassy

After 9/11, the securitization of U.S. diplomatic missions went far beyond moving embassies outside city centers and reinforcing them against attacks. Indeed, as U.S. foreign policy's focus turned to the global war on terror, U.S. embassies, consulates and other diplomatic outposts in conflict zones began to resemble military-forward operating bases.

So was born the American fortress embassy. Although the term "fortress" is sometimes applied to all U.S. embassies in a nod to their design and preoccupation with security, here I am referring to a very specific sub-species of the American embassy. Some version of the fortress embassy had existed before, in places such as Beirut. Other versions have appeared in places such as Dhaka, Bangladesh, where security restrictions make programming and outreach nearly impossible. U.S. embassies and consulates in Pakistan have also grown more fortress-like. But they are not (yet) in the same category I focus on here. Military-inspired approaches to security have taken the concept of a "fortress embassy" to new heights.

A fortress is variously defined as "a fortification, a defensive military construction;" "a military stronghold;" "a heavily protected and impenetrable building;" "a large and permanent fortification sometimes including a town;" or "a large, strong building or group of buildings that can be defended from attack."[13]

The fortress embassy is all of these things, but it is also more than a set of physical structures and procedures designed to protect against attacks. In the figurative sense, it is also a space "not susceptible to outside influence or disturbance."[14] It therefore represents a culture that is preoccupied with security, inward looking, suspicious of locals and unwilling to take any risks. The goals and operations of public diplomacy, by contrast, are outward looking and focused on engagement with local populations.

The consequences of a fortress embassy for public diplomacy go beyond its physical structure. At a fortress embassy or consulate, operations *are* policy, in spite of what public diplomacy mission statements and policymakers say the actual policy goals should be. Put differently, if you cannot see locals on a regular basis, if you cannot get to events, if you cannot interview candidates for exchange programs, and if you cannot effectively monitor grants and cooperative agreements, as a public diplomacy professional you are not supporting policy goals as outlined in mission statements.

Why establish diplomatic missions in places where the conduct of traditional diplomacy is not possible? On one level, the emergence of U.S. embassies in war zones reflected a push for the State Department to "step up to the plate" in the stabilization of Iraq, and later Afghanistan, after having a diminished role during the initial U.S. occupation of Iraq after 2003. This was particularly true as U.S. policy later turned to "nation building" measures in both Iraq and Afghanistan. But the need for a robust diplomatic presence went beyond this. Diplomats were also necessary to provide support to extensive military and intelligence operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. For instance, diplomats in Iraq played a central role in negotiating the terms, length and withdrawal of the U.S. military presence.[15] Moreover, diplomats were needed in

both countries to support various kinds of counterterrorism cooperation and operations.

Yet, the increased presence of diplomats in war zones did not necessarily translate into enhanced influence for the State Department, much less effective public diplomacy outreach. For one, the diplomatic presence was still overshadowed by the military in terms of personnel and capacity. Moreover, at the new "fortress embassies", diplomats were severely constrained in their ability to leave the compound or to receive visitors, while military and intelligence personnel had much greater freedom of movement. And in any case, the movements of diplomats were subject to military escorts, or escorts by security contractors, most of whom were former military personnel. While public diplomacy officers were represented in Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Iraq and Afghanistan, there, too, they operated as part of military-dominant teams on military bases.[16] As American diplomacy became increasingly militarized, many diplomats embraced the glamor and recognition afforded by serving in close proximity to and under the protection of their Department of Defense counterparts. Nevertheless, their ability to fulfill their diplomatic mandate suffered as a consequence.

By the end of the 2000s, the largest U.S. embassy in the world was located in Baghdad, Iraq.

The new Baghdad embassy compound, which opened in 2009, was designed as a fortress within a fortress within the Iraqi capital's heavily fortified "Green Zone."[17] This paradigmatic example of a fortress embassy cost $750 million to build and employed around 5,000 people. It continues to cost the U.S. taxpayer additional hundreds of millions of dollars a year to run, featuring a gleaming chancery, two sparkling swimming pools, tennis courts, a hospital, a state-of-the-art fitness center, a food court and extensive well-kept lawns. In

addition, well-appointed apartments were constructed for U.S. diplomats, while third-country contractors were given more austere, windowless temporary trailers. The embassy generates its own electricity and features water and sewage treatment facilities.[18] The compound occupies an area larger than the Vatican City. If it were not for the ubiquitous blast walls and roving armed guards, it could be mistaken for an American college campus in a southwestern state like Arizona. But the question remains: how much diplomatic "bang" is the U.S. getting from spending so many "bucks" in such fortress embassy environments?

Security measures at the embassy include several layers of concrete blast walls, reinforced buildings and windows, helicopter transport between the airport and embassy, and thousands of security contractors from an array of countries—Peru, Uganda and Kenya, among others—acting as perimeter guards. Further reinforcing the separation from the local community, very few Iraqis work at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad. In part this is because local employee security vetting procedures are arduous. Moreover, as U.S. government employees, Iraqi citizens are more likely to be targeted by extremists.

The fortress embassy approach represented by the U.S. mission in Baghdad became the model for an expanded and fortified Green Zone in Kabul, Afghanistan, which has now become the largest American embassy in the world (followed closely by the embassy in Baghdad). Elements of the fortress embassy have also been adopted at U.S. embassies in conflict-ridden countries from Pakistan to Niger.

Once physical and bureaucratic behemoths like the U.S. embassies in Baghdad and Kabul are built at enormous cost, a certain inertia prevails. It is difficult to launch a debate about downsizing or removing them altogether. Iraq has no

shortage of violence, but it is hard to argue, especially after the defeat of the Islamic State, that it is still a war zone. Other places where fortress embassies exist, such as Pakistan, have no shortage of threats but are certainly not active war zones.

Moreover, few actors have sufficient interest to advocate any meaningful changes to the fortress embassy approach. Multiple contracting companies have profited handsomely from providing services to these embassies while U.S. government personnel receive enormous financial rewards from service at fortress embassies. Additionally, the zero-risk approach to security, manifested in the protocols and physical embassy features, generates its own inertia. No bureaucrat in Washington wants to be the one who makes a decision to lower security in a way that might benefit the diplomatic mission, but could also endanger personnel and result in a Congressional investigation of accountability.

The Benghazi Syndrome

The political furor that followed the September 11, 2012 attack on the U.S. mission in Benghazi, Libya resulted in intensification of the zero tolerance for risk policy.[19]

The effect on U.S. public diplomacy in Libya was direct and detrimental. In the wake of the attacks, security at the embassy in Tripoli, located 630 miles from the eastern city of Benghazi, was tightened significantly; additionally, programs were canceled and American staff members were evacuated. The construction of a new fortress embassy followed the attack with remarkable speed. I was one of a small group of diplomats who stayed behind to continue to carry out public diplomacy programs. I was heartened when President Obama went on TV to say that the U.S. diplomatic mission in Libya would continue. But diplomats were vastly, almost comically, outnumbered by security staff and prevented from leaving the embassy except on the rarest of occasions.

As a result, we were also isolated not only from outreach but also from a regular flow of information vital to both security and diplomacy.

All of this happened at a critical juncture in Libya, when hopes for a peaceful democratic transition were still high. Polls showed that ordinary Libyans had a deep (and for an Arab public, unprecedented) reservoir of goodwill toward the U.S. As Lindsey Benstead and I wrote in a CPD Blog post in 2017:

> "U.S. public diplomacy never seized on this opportunity or recovered from the Benghazi attacks and the scandal manufactured around them by mostly Republican politicians in Washington as a way to discredit the Obama administration. In contrast to the notion that Libyans, socialized under forty years of Qadhafi's xenophobic rule, are hostile to outsiders, Libyans actually sought ties with the West."[20]

After returning from Libya, I wrote a *Los Angeles Times* op-ed in which I argued,

> "It was appropriate, after the Benghazi attacks, for Congress to examine the attacks and evaluate security shortcomings and failures. This was done, and a report was also issued by a State Department Accountability Review Board. Since then, there has been no new information, no evidence of conspiracies and no smoking gun."[21]

But the witch hunt continued, leading up to some of the events surrounding the 2016 presidential election. I was surprised, after the publication of my *Los Angeles Times* op-ed, to receive warm messages of support

from American diplomatic colleagues around the world, including U.S. ambassadors at missions not traditionally considered "danger" postings. Many felt that the new and often irrational zero-risk approach to risk adversely affected their ability to carry out public diplomacy activities. If there is an inherent tension between mission and security in the best of circumstances, Benghazi had swung the pendulum decisively in favor of the latter.

In an excellent but disheartening piece for the *New York Times Magazine* in late 2012, the journalist Robert Worth wrote about the Benghazi tragedy:

> "[Ambassador Steven's death] set off a political storm that seems likely to tie the hands of American diplomats around the world for some time to come. Congressmen and Washington pundits accused the administration of concealing the dangers Americans face abroad and of failing Stevens by providing inadequate security. Threats had been ignored, the critics said, seemingly unaware that a background noise of threats is constant at embassies across the greater Middle East. The death of an ambassador would not be seen as the occasional price of a noble but risky profession; someone had to be blamed."

Worth's piece includes an interview with retired Ambassador Ronald Neumann, who conceded that "the dangers have gotten worse," but also noted that "the change is partly psychological." "There's less willingness among our political leaders to accept risks, and all that has driven us into the bunker."[22]

The Fortress Embassy and Public Diplomacy Operations

Nearly everything about the fortress embassy model runs counter to the ethos of public diplomacy. The security bubble, coupled with arduous procedures for entry and exit by embassy personnel reinforce the idea of complete separation from the local population. While citizens of the host country can theoretically visit fortress embassies, in reality very few beyond a small number of privileged elites ever do so. And the vast majority of staff working inside the fortress embassy never see the world beyond the walls. "When you are posted to a fortress embassy," one officer told me, "it is as if you are not really in that country."[23]

For both the diplomat requesting access, and the visitor who must brave multiple layers of security, the barriers to arranging in-person engagements are formidable. For local visitors, there is the humiliation of being subjected to multiple searches and waiting outdoors in the sun, rain or cold. Furthermore, there are built-in risks for local visitors, who may be surveilled and reported on by exterior perimeter guards with links to groups hostile to the U.S.

As for the American staff, they must seek advance approval for external movements, justifying each of them as "mission critical." Spontaneous engagements are usually off the table. A range of security considerations and at times limited security staff resources also result in restrictions on staff movements. In an environment with little to no appetite for risk, justifying any movement as "mission critical" becomes an impossible exercise, especially for public diplomacy practitioners. The public diplomacy mission is seen as vague and unnecessary in the eyes of many Diplomatic Security managers empowered to approve or deny external movements. This means that, at times, PD officers face greater obstacles in justifying their external movements as "mission critical."

As a Diplomatic Security colleague in a high-threat post once told me after denying my movement request to speak to students at a local university, "Listen I understand that it would be nice to visit the university. But if something happens to you, how am I going to explain this to my bosses in Washington? That I let you go out and get killed because you wanted to chat with a bunch of students?" Consequently, those in public diplomacy roles often lose out to colleagues in other sections when competing for movement resources. Such obstacles are compounded by personal protection details made up in large part of former military personnel who may continue to see the world outside the embassy walls as a war zone and the local population as inherently dangerous. While bodyguards cannot deny movement requests, as the security personnel on the "front lines" of protecting diplomats, they can certainly sway the calculations of Diplomatic Security managers in the direction of even less risk acceptance.

What could so many staff members who are so limited in their movements possibly do on a daily basis at a fortress embassy? First, it is important to remember that the vast majority of staff members at fortress embassies are support and security staff, and not diplomats charged with any kind of engagement with the host country. This is because one of the primary functions of a fortress is force protection and management of what amounts to a self-contained small city. Accordingly, the jobs of most staff are devoted to running and protecting a complex operation composed of multiple agencies and organizations. In such an environment, much of the focus inevitably becomes inward looking. One public diplomacy officer who served at a fortress embassy described the absurdities that arise from their inward focus:

> "I had one place—one place—on the compound where I could organize events for larger groups of locals. But one day,

> unbeknownst to me, the management people approved the installation of a golf simulator [for the use of compound staff] in that very space. Yes, they put in a f^^&%$ golf simulator. It was a ridiculous expense, tens of thousands of dollars, but beyond that nobody consulted the public diplomacy section, because nobody remembers that this is actually a diplomatic mission and not some kind of summer camp."[24]

The golf simulator was put in to boost morale—a worthy goal—but in the process the central objective of what is meant to be a diplomatic mission was entirely forgotten.

The fact that a relatively small number of diplomats focused on outward engagement are vastly outnumbered by security and support staff and restricted in their ability to leave the compound means that their traditional function—meeting with locals—become a rare, rather than daily, event. Instead, they rely on local staff to be their "eyes and ears" to the outside world, and instead busy themselves with administrative tasks wholly unrelated to their roles as public diplomats: personnel matters, internal embassy management, writing reports and cables and bureaucratic wrangling with Washington. It is difficult, from the perspective of both the stated mission of public diplomacy and the enormous expense to the U.S. taxpayer, to reconcile the number of U.S. diplomats at fortress embassies with the miniscule amount of face-to-face interaction they have with host country locals.

All of this begs another question: given such constraints, why would public diplomacy practitioners consider serving at fortress embassies? Here it is helpful to point out the multiple incentives that help compel all American diplomats to accept such postings in large numbers. Yes, duty to

country—as well as a sense that diplomacy had to be part of the mix in places central to U.S. foreign policy such as Iraq and Afghanistan—has motivated many American Foreign Service Officers to undertake postings in dangerous places. But there are other motivators as well. First, there are immense financial incentives, often amounting to doubled salaries, coupled with three free meals daily and a host of other perks. There is the enormous benefit of allowing one's family to remain at the previous posting (meaning that the U.S. government is funding two households simultaneously), thereby avoiding the disruption of children's continuity in international schools. In addition, there is the heightened probability of scoring an onward posting in a desirable location. For all of these reasons, service at a fortress embassy has become something of a rite of passage in the U.S. Foreign Service.

While also motivated by service in countries that are difficult but important to U.S. policy, many diplomats also resign themselves to the inherent limitations that come with serving in a fortress embassy—limited contact with the outside world, lessened ability to make an impact during a one-year tour with multiple "rest and relaxation (R&R)" breaks, long periods away from family, not to mention the security risks—in exchange for the benefits that come with such postings. In short, while some public diplomacy practitioners try to push the limits of the fortress embassy system, many wait out one-year tours, fatalistically accepting that they are unlikely to actually ever do much real public diplomacy. One officer who did push the envelope with security staff was met with incredulousness: "Why are you pushing this so hard?" a security officer asked him; "Just occupy the role for a year. You get your big paychecks and you get your 3 R&Rs—why make life for yourself and us difficult?"[25]

As a former Foreign Service Officer serving in Tripoli, Libya and Basrah, Iraq, I had a front-row seat to the fortress

embassy model and mentality. At both of these posts, I found that negotiations with Diplomatic Security officers over the extent to which I could carry out the most basic part of the diplomatic craft—engaging with foreign interlocutors—were often more challenging than any negotiations I entered into with host country officials and institutions. I observed firsthand how a "zero-risk" approach impeded not only our ability to enhance mutual understanding and expand people-to-people ties with ordinary Libyans and Iraqis at critical junctures, but also the capacity of the U.S. to understand local conditions and attitudes. I became convinced that there was a significant imbalance between security and mission at such American diplomatic missions overseas. I saw this as a disservice both to U.S. national security objectives and to the average American taxpayer. The next section of this report is about the consequences of this imbalance.

III. The Consequences of the Fortress Embassy for Public Diplomacy

In the previous section, I discussed the negative consequences of the fortress embassy model for U.S. public diplomacy in general terms. In this section, drawing on my own experience and interviews with public diplomacy practitioners who have served in high-threat posts, I note five consequences of the imbalance between mission and security. The list is not meant to be comprehensive, but rather to give readers a flavor of how the misbalance negatively impacts the public diplomacy mission, and by extension, U.S. foreign policy objectives.

1. *Limited Outreach and Relationships Mean Limited Influence*

Successful public diplomacy necessitates the building of long-term relationships of trust with a broad array of interlocutors: journalists and social media figures, academics

and artists, to name a few. Building such relationships and trust, in turn, requires the kind of "face time" that technology can never substitute. As one seasoned public diplomacy officer told me, "you need to connect with people before everything else. Once you connect with them, face-to-face, as a human being, once there is trust, you have a foundation for all other discussions."[26] Trust and credibility, in other words, are the basis for meaningful relationships through which public diplomacy objectives can be met. Regular person-to-person contact as a way to build trust is important everywhere, but it is of critical importance in non-Western cultures.

For the reasons described earlier, the fortress embassy discourages such contact, to the detriment of the public diplomacy goal of influencing foreign publics.

When I served as PAO in post-Benghazi Libya, at a time when the country was unraveling, the U.S. was absent, confined to an embassy compound which was becoming more fortified every day. We were absent at a time when our potential leverage was greatest owing to the American intervention in support of anti-Qadhafi rebels during the uprising. We were absent, for instance, from discussions led by the United Nations Mission about how to pursue transitional justice. We did not engage the media or other opinion-makers on the subject. In the end, under the duress of well-armed militias, the fragile interim Libyan parliament passed a vetting law known as the Political Isolation Law (PIL) whose provisions were harsher even than de-Baathification in Iraq. The law helped precipitate exclusion, polarization, and ultimately, the fragmentation of Libya. I do not mean to imply that greater U.S. engagement using the tools of public diplomacy would have preempted the PIL. Other, greater, forces were at play. At the same time, we don't know what influence the U.S. might have had, because we never attempted to exercise it. The unwillingness to take any risk,

of course, was driven by an extraordinary event, the killing of an ambassador. But the zero-risk mentality to which it gave rise—driven in large part by politics in Washington—went beyond the tragedy and the risk.

2. *Limited Outreach Means That the Audience for Public Diplomacy is Narrower*

One mantra of U.S. public diplomacy in the post-9/11 era has been the goal of reaching "broader and deeper." The idea is that outreach and programs should focus not just on elites in capital cities but also on provincial cities, rural areas, women, youth, ethnic, racial, religious and sexual minorities, grassroots civil society and various marginalized populations. Public diplomacy practitioners, furthermore, have been encouraged to reach beyond the "usual suspects" in targeting individuals for exchange and training programs. The importance of broader and deeper outreach was confirmed by the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011. For many decades, U.S. diplomatic engagement in Arab countries had focused on elites at the expense of those who were at the vanguard of the Arab Spring: young activists. As a result, many in the U.S. government entirely missed that the uprisings were coming.[27]

But the fortress embassy model makes the goal of "broader and deeper" exceedingly difficult to realize. Public diplomacy officers, as noted above, face severe constraints in traveling outside the compound in the capital city, much less going to other cities and regions of the host country. Security officials at fortress embassies encourage diplomats to invite visitors to come to the embassy or consulate rather than allowing officials to travel outside of it. But a visit to the embassy is often impossible for potential interlocutors from outside the capital for logistical and financial reasons. Internet technology can bridge the gap to some extent, for instance by allowing for Skype-based interviews of candidates for

exchange programs. But this assumes that internet service is strong and reliable in provincial areas. And it does not solve the problem of effective recruitment of candidates outside the capital. As a result, exchange participants from countries where fortress embassies operate tend to come from capital cities.[28]

Yet, outreach to diverse audiences is not just a feel-good thing: it delivers results. My colleagues and I at the U.S. Consulate General in Basrah, Iraq, were surprised to find that our social media postings depicting some low-cost programs such as visits to important local cultural sites and engagements with groups such as the beloved local soccer team and minority groups such as the Black Iraqis generated much more interest—some, in fact, went viral—than items we posted highlighting U.S. contributions in the war against the Islamic State (despite that war being an existential issue for the southern Iraqi Shia amongst whom we worked).[29] The experience highlighted for us the importance of direct outreach to diverse local audiences, and the parallel importance of highlighting the U.S. through frames that go beyond its military prowess. However even simple visits to local communities necessitated intense negotiations over security protocols, not to mention whether they were "mission critical." If it were not for the commitment and engagement of our Consul General and Public Affairs section head, they would not have happened at all.

3. Limited Outreach Means Limited Awareness and Limited Cultural Fluency

As every good practitioner knows, public diplomacy is not only about influencing. It is also about listening.[30] Listening allows public diplomacy officers to understand their operating environment, their host culture, and the concerns of ordinary people in the host country. Cultural fluency is a must for all diplomats, but especially for public

diplomats. Listening requires the right setting: to use a currently fashionable term on American university campuses, it requires "safe spaces" for American diplomats and their interlocutors to meet and have open discussions. In many countries, for cultural and security reasons, communications technology cannot create such a safe space, and even if and when it is used as a substitute for face-to-face contact, the quality and content of an exchange is altered. It is also altered when diplomats are compelled to meet with their local contacts in the presence of heavily armed bodyguards.

What public diplomacy practitioners learn from diverse contacts, in turn, can influence policy debates at the embassy and in Washington. The perspectives afforded by public diplomacy contacts are often uniquely important, especially given that political and economic officers tend to meet with a narrow range of official and elite interlocutors. When public diplomacy officers bring civil society perspectives to the table at "Country Team" meetings, they might alert the ambassador and their colleagues to the pulse of local public opinion and thus to looming crises.

All of this is not to say that U.S. public diplomacy practitioners should become primarily "reporting officers" or collectors of human intelligence. Any perception that this is their primary or even secondary purpose could harm their credibility in the eyes of their contacts. But this does not stop PD officers from using insights gleaned from their contacts to positively influence policy, and indeed, to better understand the security environment.

In Libya, public diplomacy contacts I developed and maintained before the Benghazi attacks became critical sources of insight for the mission when protests broke out in Tripoli and officials in Washington, D.C. panicked that they might turn against the embassy. We were quickly able to determine—and communicate to our bosses in

Washington—that these protests did not represent a threat. Rather, we learned that the protests had been organized by civil society activists whose ire was directed against the very same extra-state militias responsible for the Benghazi attack. Similarly, in Iraq, contact with academics who were at the forefront of protests calling for an end to corruption in political parties and government helped us to understand local grievances in greater detail and to appreciate the extent to which corruption had penetrated local politics.

The security-first mentality of fortress embassies makes it hard to argue for the value that comes from meeting with locals to increase situational awareness and cultural fluency. Regrettably, security officials operating in the fortress embassy paradigm often do not understand why regular meetings with artists, intellectuals or civil society activists are "mission critical" in the way I have just described. In many countries where security concerns exist, American diplomats are among the least well-informed expatriates. One prominent journalist who long reported from West Africa once told me that he gave up talking to U.S. diplomats posted to the region since they had little to offer in terms of insight or information. Instead, it was the journalist who often informed them of what was happening outside the confines of the American embassy.

4. Limited Outreach Means Poor Monitoring of Grants and Implementers and Alumni Contacts

U.S. public diplomacy has long depended on partnerships with local organizations to implement programs, grants and cooperative agreements. Such partnerships are even more critical in the context of the fortress embassy, where American diplomats face constraints in their movements. Indeed, just as the management and operations needs of the fortress embassy gave rise to armies of contractors, so heightened security and a massive inflow of assistance funds

in the 2000s gave rise to countless local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) who receive U.S. government money to implement public diplomacy and assistance programs at high-threat posts. Securitization has led to the outsourcing of programs to local NGOs that were formerly the domain of public diplomacy personnel.[31] Moreover, at fortress embassies there is often an overreliance on locally engaged staff to perform these duties, which comes with its own set of problems.

An additional consequence of practices at fortress embassies is that many of the activities of such implementers go unsupervised and unmonitored for extended periods of time. Often locals are hired to do the monitoring, but neither this nor Skype sessions can substitute for site visits by U.S. public diplomats. Moreover, limited outreach means that more than often, the same "known quantity" NGOs are relied upon as implementers for many years. As one interviewee who served in a fortress environment told me, some organizations, despite receiving U.S. government funds for years, had never met a representative of the U.S. embassy.

Severe restrictions on outreach at fortress embassies also mean that alumni of USG exchange programs cannot serve as "force multipliers" for public diplomacy. Although fortress embassies do send a reasonable amount of exchange participants to the U.S. on short- and long-term exchanges targeting different age groups and professions, public diplomacy sections in these embassies often find it hard to follow up with regular alumni engagements, thereby lowering the intended impact of these programs.

5. *No Incoming Exchange Programs Narrow People-to-People Linkages*

Exchange programs are part of the bread-and-butter of public diplomacy. In "normal" public diplomacy operating

environments, exchange implies people going in both directions. While public diplomacy sections at fortress embassies administer a full range of exchange programs, they are usually limited to "outbound" participants while incoming Americans are extremely rare. Even with the focus on outbound exchanges, very few local nationals have the opportunity to travel to the U.S. given the visa restrictions usually placed on residents of conflict environments. This deprives host country citizens of opportunities to have contact with non-official Americans, especially since tourists or American students also do not come to conflict-ridden countries. This makes the people-to-people aspect of public diplomacy all the more important. While student and faculty exchanges may be truly hard to envision in the near future, this should not preclude any "inbound" exchange visitors altogether. If contractors working at fortress embassies are not subjected to the same restrictions as so-called "direct hire" or diplomatic personnel, it is not impossible to envision hosting and designing a program around an American professor, artist or other exchange visitor on the compound.

IV. Toward a New Approach to Security and Mission at Fortress Embassies:

Some Policy Recommendations

In this penultimate section, I offer some policy recommendations that aim to redress the imbalance between mission objectives and security requirements, all while acknowledging the security risks that are very real in fortress embassy operating environments. This is not intended to be a comprehensive list of possible solutions, but a sampling of ideas that could help to broaden PD activities in conflict environments.

1. *Match Objectives to Operations and Resources and Let Go of the Zero-Risk Mentality*

The State Department owes public diplomacy officers embarking on tours at fortress embassies fair assessments and expectations of what their mission really is. This, in turn, necessitates the articulation of answers to larger questions about the U.S. diplomatic presence in dangerous places. Why are we there, especially if no external movement is worth the risk? What are the objectives? If it is just to fly the flag to demonstrate U.S. commitment, or to cover for intelligence or military operations, then diplomats going out to such postings should be told just that. Taxpayers should as well. On the other hand, if there is agreement that public diplomacy is part of the overall mission, and that public diplomacy cannot be divorced from its outward-looking tradecraft, then it is fundamentally unfair to tell PD officers to carry out their mission in conditions of zero risk. It would be like telling a firefighter that she cannot get a burn or a physician that she will never be exposed to a disease. Instead:

- There has to be some risk acceptance at all levels of the State Department hierarchy. It has to start from above, with senior Department leaders articulating to their subordinates that diplomats who choose high-threat postings are aware of the risks, and want to do their jobs accepting that there cannot be perfect security. It is only through strong leadership from the top that the mentality of zero risk acceptance by security professionals can be changed to one that reflects not only the real dangers present at fortress embassies but also reflects what has become known as a "cover-your-ass" approach.

- Chiefs of mission need to be empowered and given the flexibility to make decisions on security protocols commensurate with stated mission goals,

the operations needed to achieve those goals, and evolving threat conditions "on the ground." Telling chiefs of mission that "nothing is more important than security" is not an effective policy. Rather, it creates confusion and ambiguity about where the diplomatic mission fits in at fortress embassies.

- The idea of "mission critical" justification for external movements needs to be abandoned. It presents an impossible bar to surmount for PD officers in particular, since their programs and engagements are hard to justify according to this opaque standard. By the very act of placing PD sections at fortress embassies, the U.S. government has deemed public diplomacy mission critical.

- Operations must be matched to the mission. If there is a public diplomacy section with an outwardly focused mission, then it should be given the security resources needed to carry out this mission and not have to constantly engage in an unequal competition for limited movement resources.

- "Risk can only be mitigated, and not eliminated" should be the guiding mantra for balancing security and mission. "The solution is triage," Anthony Quainton, a three-time retired ambassador, states, "balancing risks and threats against the requirements of programmatic and diplomatic activity in dangerous foreign environments."[32]

- PD officers should be encouraged by chiefs of mission to advocate for their programs. They should be encouraged to not simply accept a "no" from security officials, who are otherwise incentivized to say "no" to every proposed movement and activity. If a security official says no, PD officers should at

minimum receive a relatively detailed explanation of why it is not possible. Section and mission chiefs need to support the public diplomacy officer in such circumstances. Accordingly, all officers should have access to threat reporting commensurate with their security clearance level.

2. *Do Some Diplomacy with Diplomatic Security*

As I have outlined above, part of the operations problem is the disconnect between diplomatic security and contract bodyguards at the fortress embassy on one hand and public diplomacy sections on the other. Public diplomacy officers perceive that their Regional Security Officer (RSO) colleagues do not understand the PD mission and perhaps even see it as trivial and not worth the risk. RSOs, for their part, see PD officers as hopelessly naïve and selfish in wanting to push the boundaries on activities in dangerous environments. Part of this is structural and will never be completely overcome: the security folks are currently incentivized to keep the public diplomats in the compound, and the public diplomats will always want to go out. But through some thoughtful internal diplomacy in Washington and at post, this gap could be bridged.

- At high-threat posts, a regular dialogue between RSOs and PD officers needs to be established and nurtured from early on. PAOs should make special efforts to include RSOs and Deputy Chiefs of Mission (DCMs) from the very early planning stages of any event, trip or activity they have in mind, so that there is a better chance that concerns are addressed. With the DCM and RSO included early they might be able to make suggestions in the planning stages, rather than just pronounce something impossible at or near the time of implementation.

- RSOs need to be transparent and consistent in the messages they deliver to PD colleagues about threats and their relationship to restrictions on movement.

- PD officers, in turn, need to educate their RSO colleagues about what public diplomacy is and how it relates to larger mission and U.S. foreign policy goals, and how PD may even mitigate security risks and enhance environmental awareness. One officer described me to me how she did exactly this at a fortress embassy: "I explained to them why this particular visit was important, and how it relates to policy. I explained how outreach to this particular group is important even in a security sense. I saw heads nodding. I moved things a little in that meeting, I think."[33]

- Contract bodyguards, even though they are not the decision-makers, need to be brought into this internal diplomacy so that they better understand where they are escorting diplomats and why. Security management could help instill in them the following, as one officer relayed to me: "We need to move on from the 'good guys and bad guys' mentality of war. The war is over. Yes, you carry a gun around, but we are here to build relationships. This is a diplomatic mission."[34]

3. *Think Out of the Box About How to Do Security in High-Threat Posts*

In so many ways, fortress embassies and consulates are stuck in a paradigm, a way of doing things, from which they cannot seem to extract themselves. But they do not have to look far to find novel ways to improve the balance between public diplomacy mission and security in high-

threat settings. Both revolutionary and incremental changes could be considered in this regard:

- The practice of placing public diplomacy personnel in fortress embassies could be reconsidered. Instead, staff could be placed in neighboring countries where they might actually have more contact with host country locals than within the confines of the fortress embassy. This approach has been to some extent adopted at the U.S. missions to Libya and Yemen in recent years, which are currently located in Tunis and Jeddah, respectively, because of sharply deteriorated security conditions in Tripoli and Sana'a. "It is ironic that to meet Libyans as an American diplomat I had to leave Libya," one officer who served at the Tunis-based Libya External Office told me.[35] Though this model necessarily limits the kinds of interlocutors PD officers are likely to meet to elites who can travel, it could be paired with regular visits to the country, during which officials could stay at approved hotels, UN compounds, and other facilities that are secure but nonetheless more amenable to meeting locals than the existing fortress embassy model. This would cost less, and ultimately make for better public diplomacy.

- George Argyros has argued for the Peace Corps security model, which is "managed through integration with the local populace and built on developing the trust and respect of the local community." Although Argyros concedes that the Peace Corps model "is not directly applicable to diplomatic missions," he argues that "the concept of integrating personnel, keeping a low-profile physical presence, and building strong relationships in the surrounding community" could "be an important aspect of enhancing security for embassy personnel."[36] Accordingly, smaller groups of

public diplomacy officers could live and work outside the fortress embassy in a context where strong connections to the local community in addition to protective measures could help balance security and mission.

- There are other security models available besides the fortress embassy one. For instance, Diplomatic Security has effectively protected diplomats in violence-prone Latin American countries such as Honduras, Mexico and Colombia for many years now. Some of the security practices in these countries could be adapted for use in fortress embassy environments.

- The massive security "packages" in which U.S. diplomats are often forced to travel—multiple, readily identifiable convoys of armored Chevrolet Suburban SUVs barreling down the street—could be reconsidered. Diplomats from other countries who are also a target for attacks, for instance, travel in much lower-profile convoys and there is nothing preventing American diplomats from doing the same. One diplomat who served in a fortress embassy noted that "many contacts asked me not to come to their offices or homes because of the high visibility of the security escorts, further reducing direct contact."[37] Another downside of the U.S. approach was on tragic display in Cameroon in 2016, when a convoy of SUVs carrying then-U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Samantha Power ran over a small Cameroonian boy, killing him instantly.[38] As one officer who served at a high-threat post told me, "traveling in massive convoys attracted a lot more attention than if we had a more modest footprint."[39] Sources within State told me that Diplomatic Security is currently examining the possibility of low-profile escorts.

- As one public diplomacy officer who served at a fortress embassy told me, "If you are going to make it hard for officers to go out, you need to find ways for people to get in. The current arrangement puts PD officers in an impossible situation."[40] To solve this issue, "in-between" spaces for public diplomacy programming and engagements that lie along the perimeter walls of a fortress embassy, perhaps with a single security screening area, could be created, allowing easier access for outsiders and removing the need for PD officers to travel outside the compound. These spaces could be used for receptions, alumni engagement, exchange program interviews and more.

V. Conclusions

As a newly minted PAO in Libya before the Benghazi attack my work came up against the obstacles of the fortress embassy mentality. While playing tennis with the late Ambassador Stevens, I expressed my frustrations to him. He offered immediate support, reminding me, with characteristic but understated wit, that my craft is called "public," and not "private" diplomacy for a reason.

Yet, it is also important to emphasize that State Department operations, and in particular public diplomacy of all types, have been necessarily constrained in high-threat posts. One cannot carry on business-as-usual public diplomacy in dangerous places.

But, as I have argued in this study, a carefully considered, balanced approach to public diplomacy mission and goals is also limited by the fortress embassy mentality and model in ways that go beyond objective assessments of security risks. This is detrimental to U.S. goals in the countries where fortress embassies operate.

This is because by design and by mentality fortress embassies have taken security to an extreme. In his 2013 piece on reconsidering embassy security measures, James Bullock recalled a cartoon published in the *Foreign Service Journal* following the release of the 1985 Inman Report. Bullock writes: "it showed a walled compound with no doors or windows, only a U.S. flag rising from within. Two puzzled locals are walking the perimeter. 'How do you get in?' one asks. 'You don't,' the other replies. 'You must be born in there.'" While this was a humorous exaggeration back then, now it does not stray far from reality.[41]

It is terribly important to do public diplomacy in places such as Pakistan, Iraq and Afghanistan. Beyond destroying the Islamic State and the Taliban and all the other "kinetic" things we want to accomplish in these places, what is the kind of relationship we want to have with Iraq and Afghanistan 5, 10 or 20 years from now? Do we want relationships and people-to-people linkages that transcend our military involvement? Can we think about countering violent extremism and terrorism in other, non-kinetic ways? How can the craft of public diplomacy help?

On one hand, public diplomacy practitioners have shown a remarkable ability to adapt to the fortress embassy model, using technology and other tools, as well as sheer determination and a willingness to push the limits and overcome the constraints. They have done extremely creative things to accomplish public diplomacy goals and implement public diplomacy programs. I know because I worked with such a public diplomacy officer in Iraq, Shana Kieran, who was able to open new channels of outreach and contact with Iraqi youth in spite of enormous challenges.

Meanwhile, missions and the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) have been creative in coming up with virtual programs, taking advantage of technology. There are

virtual speaker programs, school-to-school linkages, and even an interactive walking tour (in real time) of New York City that the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad hosted to highlight different ethnic neighborhoods, thereby showing the value of diversity and the U.S. as a nation of immigrants. In other words, social media and internet technology can help overcome some of the limits of fortress embassies. But they also have limits.

It is also worth emphasizing that some Regional Security Officers in fortress embassy settings *are* supportive of public diplomacy and do their best to facilitate its mission. But the structural incentives and constraints generally work against them being so.

As retired Ambassador Prudence Bushnell, who was chief of mission in Nairobi at the time of the embassy bombing there, told the journalist Robert Worth, "No one has sat back to say, 'What are our objectives?' The model has become, we will go to dangerous places and transform them, and we will do it from secure fortresses. And it doesn't work."[42]

Some may point to the deeply-rooted factors driving anti-Americanism in the Muslim societies where fortress embassies are located, pointing to the hopelessness of changing "hearts and minds." Perhaps some anti-Americanism is structural and inevitable. But I also met so many young people in Libya and Iraq who wanted badly to have a relationship with the U.S. Not engaging such audiences is a missed opportunity to invest in the future. This requires increased investment in public diplomacy in general.

At fortress embassies in challenging security environ-ments, it requires a rethinking of the balance between secu-rity and mission so as to meet the public diplomacy goals of meaningful people-to-people engagements, building long

term relationships, and preparing a foundation for long term trust and goodwill.

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