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July 5, 2005

A Project of the USC Center on Public Diplomacy
Middle East Media Project

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AMMAN, July 2005

A desk, two computers and a few shelves of books on the second floor of the library at the American University of Kuwait represent one of the front lines in Washington's battle for hearts and minds in the Muslim Middle East.

The university is new. It opened its doors to students for the first time last fall and is still in the process of receiving accreditation. From day one, however, it has had an "American Corner." The setup is fairly typical: a desk staffed by a university employee who has received special training from the local U.S. embassy, a couple of computers with Internet access, and around 200 books on American subjects. These range from academic works on law and history and reference works on the U.S. political system, to aspects of popular culture ("Film Posters of the 80's"). A few comfortable chairs round out an adjacent reading area. When the embassy offers visiting speakers to the university, they sometimes use the "American Corner" for their talks.

"The idea is to form a resource for people who want either to do in-depth research or just to familiarize themselves with various aspects of American society and culture," says Haynes Mahoney, the public affairs officer at the U.S. Embassy in Amman, Jordan. Mahoney and his staff have set up American Corners at both Jordan University and at Hashimiya University, also in Jordan.

The program, he says, is "quite successful. We've had a number of speaker programs held at these and in the future we hope to have digital video conferences."

The concept is not new. The first American Corners were set up at universities in the old Soviet Union, and the State Department has embraced it more broadly in the post-Cold War world. American Corners have largely replaced the free-standing cultural centers and American libraries that the old United States Information Agency used to run around the world.

In an era of tight budgets American Corners have the double advantage of being both cost-effective and safe. The bill for setting one up is between $50,000 and $75,000. They also represent far less obvious targets than the libraries and cultural centers of old. Since they are staffed by employees of the host institution, their continuing costs are minimal, as is the potential exposure of U.S. government employees to security threats.

American Corners are an attempt to cope with a new era, one in which USIA no longer exists (it was rolled into the State Department in 1999), and one in which cultural affairs has arguably suffered more severe budget cuts than any other part of the traditional U.S. public diplomacy apparatus.

“Culture, in this sense, means education primarily, and exchanges between people,” says Hilary Olsin-Windecker, the counselor for press and public affairs at the American Embassy in Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates. “It’s not ‘Culture’ with a capital C. That kind of activity over the last 10 years has just about ceased.”

Indeed, the striking thing about many of today’s U.S. government-funded cultural programs is that they are both widespread and yet remarkably quiet in their administration. Walk through the better-off parts of Amman and it is hard to miss the posters advertising a French film festival, the performance of a visiting Italian dance troupe or the beginning of a new round of Spanish language classes at the Instituto Cervantes. Offerings from the American Embassy, though extensive, are rarely publicized in this way.

These include long-standing exchange programs, such as Fulbright, and more recent programs such as the State Department’s Middle East Partnership Initiative, which focuses on promoting democratization and women’s rights.

Public events are more likely to involve talks at a university or to a local business group by a visiting government official or intellectual. Mahoney and Olsin-Windecker both also cited recent visits by two basketball players from Georgetown University who worked out with local teams and taught youth basketball clinics (in much of the Middle East

basketball is second only to soccer as the most popular sport). One does not tend to find posters for such things hanging in the local supermarkets.

With a total staff of 26, Mahoney runs from Amman one of the largest information and public affairs offices in the region. The office in Abu Dhabi is relatively small, consisting of Olsin-Windecker her and two assistants. Yet when asked to name a particularly successful recent program, both cited initiatives notable for their quiet nature.

Mahoney takes particular pride in an exchange program that sent two dozen Islamic clerics to the United States over the last three years. "They were sort of junior imams who would give khutbas (sermons) in the local mosque," he said.

He cited a post-visit meeting with one cleric from Ma'an, a city in southern Jordan known for its periodic outbursts of anti-regime violence. Mahoney says the imam told his congregation that, far from being reviled in the United States, he had been welcomed in churches and synagogues alike and given an opportunity to explain that Islam is a peaceful religion. "He said, … 'I realized that the Americans are people with their own values that are not that different from our values. So, whatever we think of American foreign policy we should be very careful to distinguish between the people of the United States and that policy.' After he got through giving this sermon, he told us, people were coming up to him and asking if he was the same individual who had been preaching before he'd gone to the United States, because before he had painted America in general as an evil force.

"We got the same reaction, or the same story, from two other imams who'd been in the United States. One from Zarqa and the other in Irbid."

Olsin-Windecker, in Abu Dhabi, described a program aimed at school children who, like the Jordanian clerics, lived far from the country's Westernized urban centers.

"We took 100 11th grade students, divided equally between male and female, in areas of the country where they didn't have much exposure to the United States, or to Westerners, or hadn't much English," she said.

The program offered intensive after-school English instruction using materials emphasizing American culture, holidays and history and culminated with visits to the embassy in Abu Dhabi designed to illustrate the diversity of the United States.

"I tried to give them a wide variety of officers that they could come in contact with – a first-generation immigrant from Afghanistan, a woman who was married to a Muslim from Somalia, a military officer. So, gradually, they had real images of Americans rather than this America that they saw in the newspaper," she said.

"Over the six months they not only improved their English dramatically, but had a very different view of the United States. We got their responses on questionnaires: 'We thought the United States hated Arabs,' or 'After 9/11, we thought that none of us were welcome or that they all disliked us. Now we see that's not true. Americans are our friends.' Or 'All of my classmates want to have a similar experience, can we get more scholarships?' Things like this. It was really amazing."

The common denominator here is the small scale of the programs, their relatively low cost (Olsin-Windecker's English-language program cost $1,000 per student) and their emphasis on participants from places far removed from the urban elite and Western expatriate populations. The hope is clearly to create a ripple effect in the wider population.

But how can the more quiet and nuanced programs of this sort compete for minds and attention amid the increasing and brassy flood of American popular culture around the region and indeed the world?

Fifteen, or even ten, years ago big-budget Hollywood movies did not open in Amman and Dubai the same weekend they open in New York and Los Angeles. Western music videos were rarely seen in the region. Round-the-clock news in English was considered an innovation (in Arabic it did not exist). "Television" meant one or two local channels. Getting five or six stations meant you lived close to a place where several countries' borders came together.

But a new reality is upon the region, one that has forced the successors of the old United States Information Agency to re-imagine their jobs.

"The State Department does not see itself as competing with American mass culture. We see our role as complementing and placing in context that popular culture," Alberto Fernandez, director of the Office of Press and Public Diplomacy in the State Department's Bureau of Near East Affairs wrote in an e-mail interview from Baghdad, where he was on temporary assignment.

While "the mechanics have changed as technology has made some aspects of culture, such as cinema, more readily available," he added, "we still have a role to play in disseminating the best of American culture – whether American literature or performing arts or fine arts or a tradition of independence and open discourse."

Doing so, however, has become increasingly difficult. "You can still – as I did in 1995 – bring an American ballet company to perform at the Citadel in Aleppo (Syria) – but you will get less support from Washington to be able to do so," Fernandez says.

Len Baldyga, a retired USIA official who closely tracks public diplomacy issues, is blunter. "We have totally abandoned the field of performing arts and therefore greatly undermined our cultural diplomacy programs," he wrote in an e-mail interview. "The global budget for performing arts is around $2 million at best. We had more than that just for the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe."

Mahoney says he is able to bring performing artists to Amman two or three times each year. "The last one we did was the Battery Dance Company which performed under the mayor's auspices downtown in the Hussein Cultural Center." He also mentions the Jazz Ambassadors program, which has long brought smaller groups of musicians to the region.

As Baldyga notes, however, this is a far cry from what the government used to do.

“In one week alone in Warsaw in 1972 we had the New York City Ballet with George Balanchine, the Merce Cunningham Dance Company, and several jazz groups who came for the Warsaw Jazz Jamboree (Charlie Mingus, Elvin Jones, Stan Getz, Miles Davis were regular representatives of the Newport Jazz Festival who would come out to the Soviet Bloc countries right after the Festival closed). There is nothing close to that level of programming now,” he said.

”Also gone are the major art and thematic exhibitions which the department organized with the Smithsonian Institution and other major American galleries for showings overseas. We regularly sent these exhibitions to the Soviet Bloc: thematic shows like Hand Tools USA, Plastics USA, Graphic Arts USA as part of the traveling exhibition service, in addition to the painting and retrospective art shows from our major galleries.”

“There is,” he concluded, “little or no Culture in the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs.”

This dearth extends to the cinema as well. Seeing the latest Hollywood blockbusters is pretty easy to do in the Middle East. Smaller independent films lacking lengthy action sequences are harder to come by.

“We used to have a film office that made it easier to do things like film festivals. But that was closed,” says Olsin-Windecker. “The most recent film experience? When I was in India we had *Amistad*,” she said, referring to Steven Spielberg’s 1997 historical drama about a rebellion aboard a slave ship.

It is difficult to find anyone who deals with public or cultural diplomacy in the field who does not complain about budget cuts.

“The U.S. has indeed largely retreated from cultural diplomacy over the past 15 years,” said Fernandez, now Washington-based but a public affairs officer in five different U.S. embassies over the course of his career. “I saw it happen before my very eyes. The narrowly utilitarian mindset of many in charge at the time saw this as useless baggage and it was among the first things jettisoned in the death throws of USIA in the late 1990s.

It is the type of activity that most quickly received the scorn of both congressional staffers and executive branch bureaucrats in Washington (although ambassadors always liked it)."

Mahoney, however, says things have begun to change. "There was a dip right after the end of the so-called 'Cold War;' a general dip in our resources … Since 9/11 there's been a dramatic reversal in terms of all of the resources that we as public affairs people have to explain American society and culture in the region."

How those new resources should be used is, however, a subject of debate. A recent study by the Council on Foreign Relations criticized U.S. public diplomacy efforts generally, and called for better "branding," noting that the recipients of U.S. government aid often do not realize where the help is coming from.

Beyond that, Mahoney notes, NGO's receiving U.S. government funds are often not eager to advertise that fact – though State Department regulations usually require that some sort of acknowledgement of the funding source be made.

"Do these NGO's, Jordanian or other NGO's, want to emblazon it across the room that they're working with the United States in this program? Often they don't, which is understandable because of the climate and the reservations people have about foreign policy here. But, generally, they do acknowledge us in one way or the other," he said.

Fernandez argues that such a focus, particularly in the area of cultural affairs, misses the point. "Branding," he says, "is overrated," adding, "America is not a brand of toothpaste."

"The problem is not 'branding' or a lack thereof," he continued. "The problem is a dearth of flexible funding in the hands of [public affairs officers] and of Washington elements supporting the field to harness their creativity and quickly fund high-impact, targeted programs to influence key audiences while promoting U.S. policy objectives."

He went on to argue that when it comes to improving America's image abroad, "many of our wounds are self-inflicted ones: Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo, the treatment of Muslim immigrants and visitors to the United States, perceptions of the rhetoric of some in American society and government, all are public-diplomacy poison that set us back tremendously. Because we have not done the other – prepare, fund, and plan pro-actively – that damage has been heightened."

"If we were engaged more fully on many human levels with Muslim and Arab audiences – in terms of a cultural dialogue and a respectful exchange of views – the damage that would have certainly come from such actions could have been muted and placed in context. For now," he concluded, "we will continue to do what we have been doing for much of my career: Try to do as much as possible with whatever one is given, try to be as creative and clever and sneaky as you can in delivering as effective and as convincing a message as you can."

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About the Middle East Media Project: The USC Center on Public Diplomacy Middle East Media Project is funded by a grant from the Schumann Center for Media and Democracy. The project examines core issues at the intersection of media and public diplomacy in the Middle East. It aims to answer the following questions: How do the Arab and western media interact and perceive each other? How are U.S. foreign policy goals promoted to and perceived by people in the Middle East? And most importantly, what sort of new initiatives could be effective in deepening mutual understanding between the Arab and western worlds?