

**ANOTHER VIEWPOINT**  
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**BETWEEN IMAGE AND REALITY: THE UNITED STATES FLOUNDERS**

**Elias H. Tuma**

**The image of the United States (US) in the Middle East and the Islamic world is poor. The Bush administration wonders why and is anxious to do something to improve it. The administration has mobilized the Voice of America to carry the message of good will, democracy, and freedom across the world. It has established Radio Sawa, Radio Frada, and al Hurra Satellite TV, all aimed at the Arab and Islamic world with the same message, to inspire change, cooperation, democracy and freedom, as perceived by the US. It is now over three years since this new media propaganda campaign has been in operation, but the US image has seen little improvement, if not deterioration. Then comes the human image builder in the person of Ms. Karen Hughes, who abandons her temporary retirement to aid her friend George Bush and serve her country. From Egypt to Jordan, to Indonesia and Turkey, on and on she roams the target countries, with grand appearance and disarming eloquence. And yet there is little image improvement to celebrate. The US is still seen as unfair, a bully, an occupier, and an imperialist, at least by most of the people in the Arab and Islamic countries, if not by the regimes in power.**

**The poor image and the inability to improve it are easy to comprehend and explain. The image is largely a reflection of the**

reality, as demonstrated by the policies and action of the given country. If the policies and actions take a more acceptable turn, the reality changes and the image will improve. The policies and actions of the US in recent years have been unfavorable, as seen by vast majorities in the Middle East, the Islamic countries, and in parts of Latin and Central America. Even so, the Bush administration persists in lecturing those countries through its electronic, printed, and human media to accept those same policies and actions as good for them and for their future. Unfortunately propaganda can go only so far in influencing the image in the absence of change in policy and action.

The image of the US has been tarnished by the evident inconsistency between its words and deeds, its perceived failure to be fair and even-handed in international affairs, and its injudicious use of power in violation of the United Nations Charter. To illustrate, the US preaches human rights and the safety of civilians, but it rarely hesitates in bombarding towns and villages in Afghanistan and Iraq, regardless of the inevitable deadly impact on civilians and innocent people. The US preaches democracy and the right to vote and then proceeds to create obstacles to prevent “undesirable” segments of the population in Palestine and Iraq from participation in the elections. The US promotes the rule of law between nations but marches illegally against Iraq, a member of the United Nations, and becomes an occupier. The US declares its respect for other nations and cultures, and then proceeds to “impose” its own values on those other cultures, as evident in its campaign for democracy,

**economic reform, free trade, and globalization as conditions for aid and good relations. It does not seem to make a difference whether or not those other countries have the same conception of democracy or preparedness for it. The US pushes for a market system even where the institutions of a market economy barely exist. It also promotes globalization regardless of the inability of those other countries to bear the harsh dislocations and other costs that ensue upon the institution of free trade in a field in which they are at a great disadvantage. The US argues for freedom of expression and then threatens to bombard al-Jazeera TV because it does not agree with its pattern of broadcasting and exposure of the war scenes in Iraq. The US condemns torture and then exports its detainees for interrogation in other countries where no protection against torture exists; this comes on the heels of the explosive discoveries of prisoner abuse by US forces in Abu Ghraib and in Guantanamo Bay. Finally, the US applies different standards to different countries with regard to Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD): it invades Iraq but tries to appease North Korea; it condemns Syria on a suspicion of acquiring WMD but ignores Israel's open secret possession of such weapons, and it befriends Pakistan, which has atomic weapons, but threatens Iran on suspicion of considering such weapons. The Arab and Muslim people never cease to ask why this double standard by a superpower that pretends to be a fair and even-handed leader of the world. If only the US would call for elimination of WMD in all countries and regions!**

The US is generous, often meaning well in trying to help other countries, but evidently its policies are misguided, poorly informed, and therefore they miss the target. These policies need not be so. For example, it would be more effective to help educate for democracy so that the recipient people can appreciate its benefits and opt for it, instead of imposing it or making its adoption a condition for aid and cooperation. The US offers aid for development but most of it goes for military expenditure and import of consumer goods. Little of that aid brings in badly needed physical capital or new techniques, both of which are indispensable for economic development and growth. The saying used to be: don't give fish to the hungry; give them fishing poles. In this context, don't give fishing poles to the needy and underdeveloped; teach them how to make the poles. Technology transfer is basic to development, but the US aid policy gives it very low priority and the regimes in power do not or cannot object.

It would be helpful for the US to remember that what is "right and efficient" in one country or environment, or at a given level of development, may not be so in others. Therefore, it would be useful for the US to abandon its all-purpose recipe for development as fit for all countries, environments, and levels of development. Instead, it would help to adopt strategies that are country-specific, based on a thorough study and understanding of the individual country, its people, institutions, and culture. Measures for development within the framework of the country-specific strategies would be more effective if

**presented as recommendations, with choices of method of implementation, so that the recipient countries would be able to make a choice.**

**Finally, the US would do itself and its image a great service by putting an end to its occupation of Iraq, leaving the responsibility for peace keeping and stabilization to the United Nations, the Arab League, the European Union, or all three of them as soon as possible. In this sense it would also be helpful to encourage Israel to put an end to its occupation of Arab land. The Arab and Islamic countries will no doubt welcome such steps and begin to see the US and its image in a more positive and rosy light.**

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