

Ten Years Later: Examining the Long Road to 9/11

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With the ten-year anniversary of 9/11 upon us, pollsters are busily marking the occasion by taking the pulse of the nation and finding out where we stand a decade after our biggest collective tragedy since Pearl Harbor. In the past two weeks no fewer than half a dozen reports have been released gauging everything from how many people will formally recognize the anniversary to how we feel about Washington's response to the terror attacks of 2001.

Last week the Brookings Institution released a sweeping survey of American public opinion a decade after the attacks. The findings are striking in several regards: for one, a majority of Americans view our current economic troubles as a result of overzealous foreign policy in the wake of 9/11, especially our invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq. They have a point. Of the roughly \$1.6 trillion that has been spent so far on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, 100 percent of it has been financed through borrowing, the Christian Science Monitor reports.

The prevailing sentiment is that these endeavors have not only been a drag on the country's standing in the world, but they've also failed to instill a sense of security and comfort. Brookings finds that two-out-of-three Americans believe U.S. power and influence in the world have declined over the past decade; meanwhile half of us feel less safe than we did ten years ago, according to a separate poll by Zogby International.

Just as telling are our beliefs about what led up to the attacks. According to Brookings, large majorities of Americans believe that Muslims hold negative opinions of U.S. foreign policy and that these views contributed to the conditions that led to the 9/11 attacks. Nearly 70 percent say bettering our relationship with Muslim-majority countries is one of the top-five most important issues facing the U.S.

If the polling is to be believed, ten years after 9/11 Americans are tired of the resentment, fear and misunderstanding that characterizes U.S. relations with the Muslim Middle East and are eager to see their leaders do something about it. What, if anything, officials will do with that information is uncertain; but past history is certainly not encouraging.

Nonetheless, the best way to forge a new path is to see what went so wrong with the old one. While nothing can ultimately justify such a horrific attack on American citizens, any thoughtful reflection on the 9/11 attacks would be incomplete without considering the foibles that took us there and dispelling some of the myths that continue to cloud American understanding of those circumstances.

Building the perfect terrorist

The road to 9/11 may have been forged by Osama bin Laden's infamous 1998 fatwa instructing Muslims of their "individual duty" to kill Americans, but the path had been tread long before then, starting as far back as the Cold War, when U.S. interests in the Middle East directed a course of action contrary to our stated goals of promoting human rights and Democracy.

Modern Islamic radicalism was born out of the excesses of the post-colonial Middle East – particularly the financial wealth and conspicuous consumption of the Saud regime, and the nationalistic and brutal Egyptian dictatorships of Gamal Nasser and Anwar Sadat – all of whom enjoyed the implicit support of

the U.S. at a time when stymieing the ambitions of the Soviet Union took precedence over encouraging democratic reform in what was then called the Third World.

By the time bin Laden traveled to Afghanistan for the first time in 1984 to fight the Soviet Union there, the notions he would exploit to create a global jihadist movement had been well established by a radical group of Arabs including his future number two, the Egyptian Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, and the Palestinian military leader Abdullah Azzam – who is credited with coining the term “Al Qaeda” and focused his rhetoric against perceived U.S. dominance in the Muslim Middle East.

As most people know, for the better part of the 1980s U.S. dollars and weaponry flowed to these very men – and others like them – who were locked in a bitter proxy war with the USSR. What's less known is that after that conflict, Western powers abandoned Afghanistan to tribal warlords, Pakistani intelligence agents, and ultimately the Taliban. As for the Arabs who fought there, when they returned home – to places like Egypt and Saudi Arabia – many of these Afghan veterans were viewed with suspicion and marginalized by the the very leaders they once counted on for support. Now trained in the art of war and radicalized by a decade-long jihad against a “Godless” invader, they turned their anger toward their home governments, and eventually the United States. In its early iteration, modern Islamic militancy maintained this regional focus. It was not until the 1990s (and the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993) that a serious effort was made within radical Islamic fringe groups to expand their war to include attacks on America and its allies.

The Myth of a “Clash of Civilizations”

Among the more enduring misconceptions to emerge in the volatile aftermath of Sept. 11 is the notion that the West and the Islamic World are currently engaged in a “clash of civilizations.” Contrary to popular belief Islamic militancy is essentially a political movement – not a cultural one – that utilizes core religious belief as a tool for furthering its goals. According to Angel M. Rabasa, a terrorism expert at the RAND Corporation, there is, in fact, little religious sentiment exploited in the recruitment policies of most jihadists, who prefer to emphasize economic and social alienation over religious duty to win new converts.

Rabasa outlines three main causal drivers of radical Islam: conditions, which would include the economic, social and political upheaval associated with post-colonial development; processes, which refer to gradually developing situations such as the Palestinian/Israeli conflict; and catalytic events, such as the First Gulf War, or more recently, civilians deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan. Foremost among these catalytic events, according to Rabasa, was the U.S. occupation of Iraq, which instead of making us safer actually fomented more hatred. On top of that, most Americans underestimate the impact that our government's seemingly unconditional support for Israel has had on Muslim public opinion over the past five decades.

A poll of Arab public opinion conducted last year by Zogby found that 64 percent of respondents see the Palestinian issue as the number one factor influencing their opinion of the United States, compared to just 4 percent that chose the War in Afghanistan, and more than half said that mediating a fair and balanced a Palestinian/Israeli peace agreement is the single most important thing the U.S. could do to improve their image of America. Yet despite this overwhelming evidence, only 7 percent of Americans see Arab/Israeli peace as the top issue affecting U.S. relations with the Muslim world. Such a disparity underscores just how out of touch many of us still are when it comes to understanding what drives Muslim sentiment.

This misunderstanding was reflected repeatedly in George W. Bush's unsuccessful attempts to sway Arab public opinion in the years following the invasion of Iraq. Commenting on the “Brand America” campaign of then Undersecretary of Public Diplomacy Charlotte Beers, Anna Tiedeman, author of “Branding America: An Examination of the U.S. Public Diplomacy Efforts After September 11, 2001,” explains:

“Beers made a classic marketing mistake by failing to truly understand her audience. Starting from the erroneous and naive assumption that 'they hate us because they don't understand us.' The problem was not, as the Bush administration asserted, that Arabs and Muslims lacked information, the problem was that they objected to American foreign policy.”

Fifty years of bad PR

The third and most persistent catalyst that helped create the current rift between the U.S. and the Muslim world is reflected in half a century of misguided U.S. public diplomacy in the region. According to foreign policy specialists and historians, while the U.S. worked tirelessly throughout the Cold War to counter Soviet influence with anti-communist messages, it overlooked the real issues of the region. The political historian James Vaughan says that throughout the period, British and American diplomats consistently misunderstood their target audience, which cared far less about the threat of Soviet communism than about Israel and their own fight for freedom from economic colonialism and despotism.

“Western propagandists were consistently striking at the wrong targets and found it impossible to effect any significant change in Arabs' views ... Policy and propaganda were out of sync,” he writes.

As American propagandists labored to paint a picture of the United States as a freedom-loving democracy where equality reined, their government supported the dictators and tyrants that were terrorizing the very populations to which they preached their mantra. Meanwhile, at home, the realities of racial segregation offered a conflicting image to those around the globe who were being schooled on the virtues of American democracy and at the same time watching Black Americans being clubbed by police in the streets of America's cities.

Experts say the effect of this contradiction was profound since PR can only have long-term effectiveness if it espouses a truthful message.

“In marketing terms, the 'brand experience' did not match with the 'brand message,’” writes Tiedeman. “When a brand message consistently agrees with and reinforces the brand experience, a relationship can be built. If, on the other hand, the brand experience is not consistent with the message, it will backfire and lead to mistrust of the brand.”

The recent Arab Spring has given the U.S. a chance to start over. But if we are to expect different results it's time that for America to sync its brand message with the experience of its target market. If we continue to say one thing while doing another, we lose what could be our last chance for real detente with the Middle East.