

GAO

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U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Strategic Planning Efforts
Have Improved, but
Agencies Face Significant
Implementation Challenges

Statement of Jess T. Ford, Director
International Affairs and Trade





Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-07-795T](#), a testimony to the Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight, House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Why GAO Did This Study

Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, polling data have generally shown that anti-Americanism has spread and deepened around the world, and several groups have concluded that this trend may have harmed U.S. interests in significant ways. U.S. public diplomacy activities undertaken by the State Department and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), which totaled almost \$1.5 billion in fiscal year 2006, are designed to counter such sentiments. Based on our prior reports, this testimony addresses (1) the negative consequences various groups have associated with rising anti-American sentiments; (2) strategic planning, coordination, and performance measurement issues affecting U.S. public diplomacy efforts; and (3) key challenges that hamper agency activities.

What GAO Recommends

We have made a number of recommendations in the past 4 years to the Secretary of State and the Chairman of the BBG to address strategic planning issues and administrative and staffing concerns. Both agencies agreed with our recommendations and have made some progress in implementing them.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-795T.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4128, fordj@gao.gov.

U.S. PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

Strategic Planning Efforts Have Improved, but Agencies Face Significant Implementation Challenges

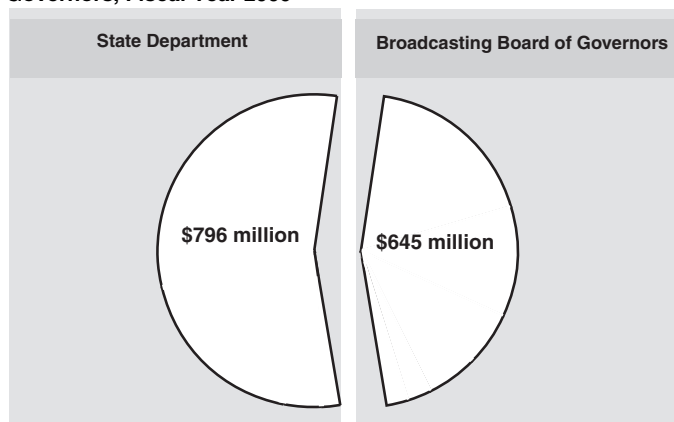
What GAO Found

Numerous experts, policymakers, and business leaders have identified various potential negative consequences of growing anti-Americanism. According to these sources, anti-Americanism may have a negative impact on American economic interests, the ability of the United States to pursue its foreign policy and military goals, and the security of Americans worldwide.

Our reports and testimonies have highlighted the lack of a governmentwide communication strategy, as well as the need for an integrated State Department strategy, enhanced performance indicators for State and the BBG, and improvements in the BBG's audience research methodology. We also reported in March 2007 that U.S. foreign assistance activities were not being consistently publicized and branded, and we recommended that State help develop governmentwide guidance for marking and publicizing these efforts. State has responded to our recommendations and has taken actions to develop a more strategic approach and measure the effectiveness of its programs. Likewise, the BBG has adapted its strategic plan to include additional performance indicators and is beginning to address our recommendations to adopt management improvements at its Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN).

Nevertheless, State and the BBG continue to face challenges in implementing public diplomacy and international broadcasting. State has shortages in staffing and language capabilities, and security issues continue to hamper overseas public diplomacy efforts. For example, in 2006 we reported that State continued to experience significant foreign language proficiency shortfalls, particularly at posts in the Muslim world. The BBG faces challenges in managing a disparate collection of broadcasters. Also, MBN faces several managerial challenges involving program review, internal control, and training.

U.S. Public Diplomacy Resources for State Department and the Broadcasting Board of Governors, Fiscal Year 2006



Source: State Department and BBG.

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am pleased to be here today to discuss GAO's work on U.S. public diplomacy efforts. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, polling data have generally shown that anti-Americanism has spread and intensified around the world and many groups have concluded that this trend may have harmed U.S. national security and business interests in significant ways. U.S. public diplomacy activities designed to counter such negative sentiments are largely divided between the State Department and the Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG).¹ In the past 4 years, we have issued a series of reports on these agencies' public diplomacy efforts (see enclosure). At the request of the ranking minority member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, we are currently reviewing how research is used to inform and direct U.S. government efforts to communicate with foreign audiences. We plan to issue a final report this summer.

The key objectives of U.S. public diplomacy are to engage, inform, and influence overseas audiences. State's Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs oversees an annual budget of nearly \$800 million, which funds the activities of program bureaus in Washington and the activities of nearly 700 public diplomacy officers located at more than 260 posts around the world and domestically. Program efforts include academic and professional exchanges, English language teaching, information programs, and news management activities. The BBG, as the overseer of U.S. international broadcasting efforts, aims to support U.S. public diplomacy objectives by broadcasting fair and accurate information, while maintaining its journalistic independence as a news organization. The BBG manages a budget of nearly \$650 million that funds multiple discrete broadcast entities that broadcast in 57 foreign languages to 125 media markets around the world.

Mr. Chairman, you asked us to discuss key findings from the reports we have issued over the past several years, particularly regarding our government's public diplomacy strategy and the challenges faced in implementing these activities in the field. Today, I will talk about (1) the negative consequences various groups have associated with rising anti-American sentiments; (2) strategic planning, coordination, and

¹The U.S. Agency for International Development participates in U.S. public diplomacy efforts by seeking to tell America's assistance story to the world. The Department of Defense has established an office to provide military support for public diplomacy to better coordinate its communication activities with those of the State Department.

performance measurement issues affecting U.S. public diplomacy efforts; and (3) the key challenges that hamper agency efforts.

As part of our reviews of public diplomacy, we have met with officials from the Department of State, the Department of Defense (DOD), the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), and the Broadcasting Board of Governors. We have also observed U.S. public diplomacy efforts in a range of countries including Egypt, Morocco, Nigeria, and Pakistan; conducted a worldwide poll of public diplomacy officials in 2003 and more limited surveys of field activity in recent reviews; and have met with public diplomacy counterparts in the United Kingdom and Germany. Finally, we convened roundtables of key agency staff and experts on public relations and the Muslim world to obtain their key insights and recommendations for improvement. The work used to support this testimony was conducted in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Summary

Public opinion polls of foreign audiences have generally shown that negative attitudes toward the United States continue to rise. For example, the Pew Global Attitudes Project has found increasing anti-American sentiment throughout the world. Numerous experts, policymakers, and business leaders have identified a variety of potential negative consequences of this growing anti-Americanism. According to these sources, anti-Americanism may have a negative impact on American economic interests around the world, the ability of the United States to pursue its foreign policy goals and succeed in foreign military operations, and the security of Americans at home and abroad. Although we cannot draw a direct causal link between negative foreign public opinion toward our country and specific outcomes in these areas, it is clear that growing anti-Americanism does not help the United States achieve its economic, foreign policy, and security goals. Therefore, U.S. public diplomacy efforts, which seek to counter negative foreign public opinion, have a critical role to play in supporting U.S. interests.

Key problems identified in our prior reports include a general lack of strategic planning, inadequate coordination among agency efforts, and problems with measuring performance and results. Beginning in 2003, we reported that the government lacked an interagency communications strategy. Four years later, a strategy still has not been released, although State officials told us that this will happen soon. Last month, we also reported on challenges in marking and publicizing U.S. foreign assistance that may result in missed opportunities to increase public awareness of U.S. foreign aid activities. Accordingly, we recommended that State

develop strategies and establish interagency agreements to better coordinate and assess the impact of U.S. marking and publicity programs. We also reported that State did not have a strategy to integrate its diverse public diplomacy activities. State began to address this shortcoming in 2005 when the current Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs developed a strategic framework to focus State's efforts on three priority goals: offer foreign publics a vision of hope and opportunity rooted in basic U.S. values, isolate and marginalize violent extremists, and nurture common interests and values. However, State has not issued guidance on how its assorted public diplomacy activities will be coordinated to achieve these goals. In addition, posts' public diplomacy efforts generally lack important strategic communication elements found in the private sector, which GAO recommended that State adopt as a means to better communicate with target audiences. Key steps in this approach include defining core messages, identifying target audiences, developing detailed communication strategies and tactics, and using research and evaluation to inform and re-direct efforts as needed. Finally, we and others have recommended that State develop more rigorous measures of effectiveness to better document the impact of its public diplomacy efforts. State has taken several steps towards this goal, including establishing a centralized office to better coordinate and direct the collection of performance data. Regarding the BBG, we have noted that the Board launched a new strategic approach in 2001 that included a focus on supporting the U.S. war on terror. The BBG made this support tangible through several key initiatives, including the creation of Radio Sawa in 2002 and the Alhurra TV network in 2004, which are run by the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN). While these are noteworthy attempts to help turn the tide of negative opinion in the Muslim world toward the United States, our August 2006 report on MBN recommended that several steps be taken to correct methodological concerns which could impact the accuracy of its audience research data. MBN continues to evaluate possible solutions to these concerns.

We also have reported that State and the BBG face multiple challenges in managing and implementing their public diplomacy programs. Several embassy officials indicated that insufficient numbers of staff and the lack of staff time for public diplomacy activities hinder outreach efforts. To help address these concerns, the Secretary of State has repositioned some staff to posts with the greatest perceived shortages; however, significant shortfalls remain. In May 2006, we reported that approximately 15 percent of State's worldwide public diplomacy positions were vacant. Updated information provided by State shows that this problem has worsened and approximately 22 percent of such positions are now vacant. We reported

that the State Department continues to experience significant shortfalls in foreign language proficiency in countries around the world. In our May 2006 report, we noted that this problem is particularly acute in the Muslim world, where 30 percent of language-designated public diplomacy positions are filled by officers without the level of language proficiency required for their positions, thus hampering their ability to engage with foreign publics. State has taken steps to address language deficiencies by bolstering its language training activities. In addition, security concerns have forced embassies to close publicly accessible facilities and curtail certain public outreach efforts, sending the unintended message that the United States is unapproachable. The department has attempted to compensate for the lack of public presence in high threat posts through a variety of means, including the use of small-scale external facilities. The BBG faces the primary challenge of managing a disparate collection of multiple discrete broadcast entities. In addition, MBN faces several managerial challenges involving program review and evaluation, editorial oversight, internal control issues, and staff training.

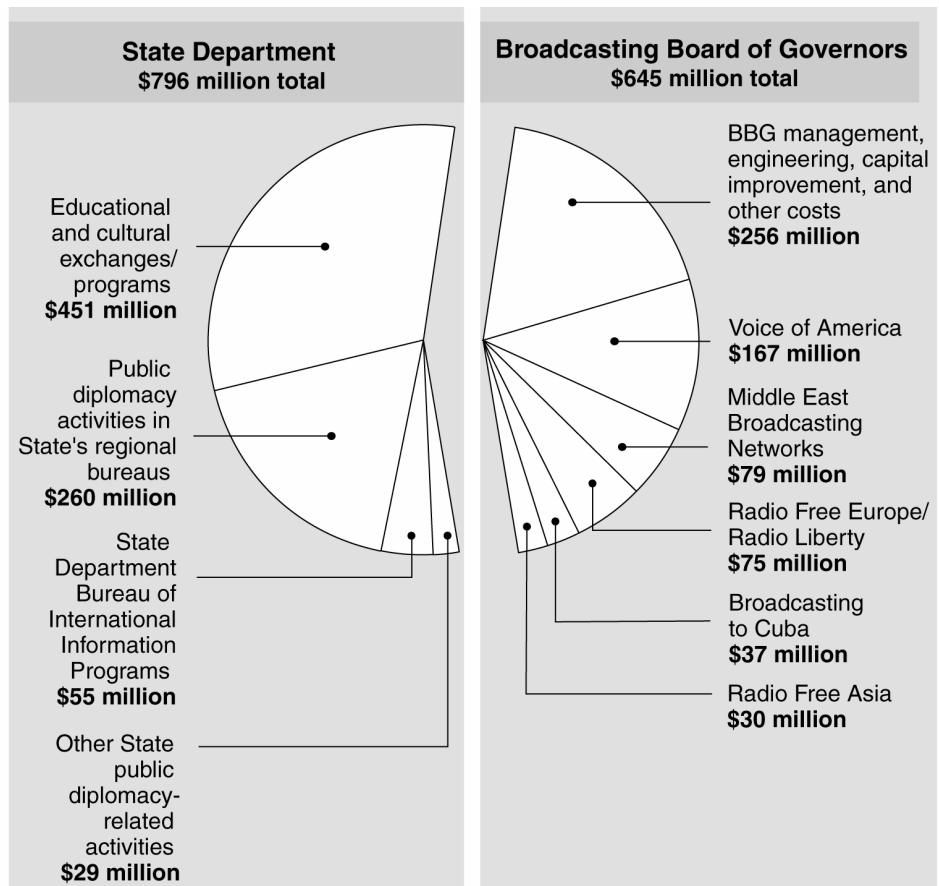
Background

The key objectives of U.S. public diplomacy are to engage, inform, and influence overseas audiences. Public diplomacy is carried out through a wide range of programs that employ person-to-person contacts; print, broadcast, and electronic media; and other means. Traditionally, the State Department's efforts have focused on foreign elites—current and future overseas opinion leaders, agenda setters, and decision makers. However, the dramatic growth in global mass communications and other trends have forced a rethinking of this approach, and State has begun to consider techniques for communicating with broader foreign audiences. Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, State has expanded its public diplomacy efforts globally, focusing particularly on countries in the Muslim world considered to be of strategic importance in the war on terror. In May 2006, we reported that this trend continued with funding increases of 25 percent for the Near East and 39 percent for South Asia from 2004 to 2006.

The BBG supports U.S. public diplomacy's key objectives by broadcasting news and information about the United States and world affairs and serving as a model of how a free press should operate. The BBG manages and oversees the Voice of America (VOA), Radio/TV Marti, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Radio Free Asia, Radio Farda, Radio Sawa, and the Alhurra TV Network.

As shown in figure 1, State and the BBG spent close to \$1.5 billion on public diplomacy programs in fiscal year 2006.

Figure 1: Key Uses of U.S. Public Diplomacy Budget Resources for State Department and the Broadcasting Board of Governors, Fiscal Year 2006



Source: State Department and BBG.

Note: Totals may not add due to rounding.

Widespread Concern Exists about the Impact of Anti-American Sentiment

As others have previously reported, in recent years anti-American sentiment has spread and intensified around the world. For example, the Pew Global Attitudes Project has found that the decline in favorable opinion of the United States is a worldwide trend. For instance, favorable attitudes toward the United States in Indonesia declined from 75 percent in 2000 to 30 percent in 2006 and from 52 percent to 12 percent over the

same time period in Turkey. While individual opinion polls may reflect a snapshot in time, consistently negative polls may reflect the development of more deeply seated sentiments about the United States.

Numerous experts, expert groups, policymakers, and business leaders have expressed concerns that anti-Americanism may harm U.S. interests in various ways. In its 2004 report on strategic communication, the Defense Science Board states that “damaging consequences for other elements of U.S. soft power are tactical manifestations of a pervasive atmosphere of hostility.” Similarly, the Council on Foreign Relations has claimed that the loss of goodwill and trust from publics around the world has had a negative impact on U.S. security and foreign policy. Anti-American sentiments may negatively affect American economic interests, U.S. foreign policy and military operations, and the security of Americans.

Anti-Americanism May Have Negative Effects on U.S. Economic Interests Around the World

According to Business for Diplomatic Action,² anti-Americanism can hurt U.S. businesses by causing boycotts of American products, a backlash against American brands, increased security costs for U.S. companies, higher foreign opposition to U.S. trade policies, and a decrease in the U.S.’s ability to attract the world’s best talent to join the American workforce. Additionally, a report from the Princeton-based Working Group on Anti-Americanism³ generally echoes the possibility that anti-Americanism may harm U.S. business interests in these same areas.

Further, as reported by the Travel Business Roundtable during previous hearings before this subcommittee, the U.S. travel industry has reported significant declines in the U.S. market share of the worldwide travel market and a decline in overseas visitors to the United States since 9/11. Further, the State Department’s 2003 report on *Patterns of Global Terrorism* recorded 67 attacks on American business facilities and 7 business casualties. In 2006, the Overseas Security Advisory Council noted that more threats against the private sector occurred in 2006 than in 2004 or 2005 in most of the industries it reports on. Finally, the Working Group

²Incorporated in January 2004 by interested private sector leaders, Business for Diplomatic Action seeks to counter anti-American sentiments that can harm U.S. business interests by helping to coordinate the outreach efforts of U.S. multinational companies.

³This working group is part of a larger effort called “The Princeton Project on National Security,” which was established by the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs at Princeton University in 2004. Members of the project come from the government, academia, business, and the non-profit sector.

on Anti-Americanism also indicated that threats to American private property and personnel working overseas have become constant in some regions, especially the Middle East, and have resulted in significantly increased security costs.

Anti-Americanism May Limit Ability to Pursue U.S. Foreign Policy

According to the Defense Science Board, the Brookings Institution, and others, anti-Americanism around the world may reduce the U.S.'s ability to pursue its foreign policy goals, including efforts to foster diplomatic relationships with other foreign leaders and to garner support for the global war on terror. For instance, in October 2003, the Advisory Group on Public Diplomacy for the Arab and Muslim World reported that "hostility toward the U.S. makes achieving our policy goals far more difficult." Specifically, according to a paper from the Working Group on Anti-Americanism, foreign leaders may seek to leverage anti-American sentiment in pursuit of their own political goals, which may then limit their future support for U.S. foreign policy. As these leaders achieve personal political successes based on their opposition to the United States, they may then be less likely to support U.S. foreign policy going forward.

Further, the 9/11 Commission, the Council on Foreign Relations, and others have reported on the possibility that anti-Americanism may also serve as a barrier to success in the global war on terror and related U.S. military operations. Specifically, the 9/11 Commission report of July 2004 stated that perceptions of the United States' foreign policies as anti-Arab, anti-Muslim, and pro-Israel have contributed to the rise in extremist rhetoric against the United States. Further, the Council on Foreign Relations has argued that increasing hostility toward America in Muslim countries facilitates recruitment and support for extremism and terror.

Anti-Americanism May Be Linked to Decreased Security of Americans Around the World

The Council on Foreign Relations also has identified potential consequences of anti-Americanism on the security of individual Americans, noting that Americans now face an increased risk of direct attack from individuals and small groups that wield increasingly more destructive power. According to State's *Country Reports on Terrorism* for 2005,⁴ 56 private U.S. citizens were killed as a result of terrorism incidents in 2005. The Working Group on Anti-Americanism suggests that there is

⁴Beginning in 2004, the State Department replaced its *Patterns of Global Terrorism* reports with annual publications titled *Country Reports on Terrorism*.

some correlation between anti-Americanism and violence against Americans in the greater Middle East but notes that the relationship is complex. For example, they note that while increased anti-Americanism in Europe or Jordan has not led to violence against Americans or U.S. interests in those areas, it does seem to play a role in fueling such violence in Iraq. Other factors, such as the visibility of Americans overseas, particularly in Iraq; the role of the media in supporting anti-Americanism; and the absence of economic security may also contribute to this violence.

While all of the topics discussed here represent areas in which anti-Americanism may have negative consequences, the empirical evidence to support direct relationships is limited. As such, we cannot confirm any causal relationships between negative foreign public opinion and specific negative outcomes regarding U.S. interests. Despite the fact that we cannot draw a direct causal link between anti-Americanism and specific outcomes in these areas, it is clear that growing negative foreign public opinion does not help the United States achieve its economic, foreign policy, and security goals, and therefore U.S. public diplomacy efforts, which seek to counter anti-Americanism sentiment, have a critical role to play in supporting U.S. interests throughout the world.

Strategic Planning, Coordination, and Performance Measurement Remain Areas of Concern

Over the past 4 years, we have identified and made recommendations to State and the BBG on a number of issues related to a general lack of strategic planning, inadequate coordination of agency efforts, and problems with measuring performance and results. Among other things, we have recommended that (1) communication strategies be developed to coordinate and focus the efforts of key government agencies and the private sector, (2) the State Department develop a strategic plan to integrate its diverse efforts, (3) posts adopt strategic communication best practices, and (4) meaningful performance goals and indicators be established by both State and the BBG. Currently, the U.S. government lacks an interagency public diplomacy strategy; however, such a plan has been drafted and will be released shortly. While the department has articulated a strategic framework to direct its efforts, comprehensive guidance on how to implement this strategic framework has not yet been developed. In addition, posts generally do not pursue a campaign-style approach to communications that incorporates best practices endorsed by GAO and others. State has begun to take credible steps towards instituting more systematic performance measurement practices, consistent with recommendations GAO and others have made. Finally, although the BBG has added audience size as a key performance measure within its strategic

plan, our latest review of MBN's operations call into question the potential value of this measure due to various methodological concerns.

Government Lacks an Interagency Public Diplomacy Strategy

In 2003, we reported that the United States lacked a governmentwide, interagency public diplomacy strategy, defining the messages and means for communication efforts abroad. We reported since then that the administration has made a number of unsuccessful attempts to develop such a strategy. The lack of such a strategy complicates the task of conveying consistent messages and therefore increases the risk of making damaging communication mistakes. State officials have said that it also diminishes the efficiency and effectiveness of governmentwide public diplomacy efforts, while several reports have concluded that a strategy is needed to synchronize agencies' target audience assessments, messages, and capabilities.

On April 8, 2006, the President established a new Policy Coordination Committee on Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communications. This committee, led by the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, intends to better coordinate interagency activities, including the development of an interagency public diplomacy strategy. We have been told this strategy is still under development and will be issued soon.

The U.S. government also lacks a governmentwide strategy and meaningful methods to ensure that recipients of U.S. foreign assistance are consistently aware that the aid comes from the United States. In March 2007, we reported that most agencies involved in foreign assistance activities had established some marking and publicity requirements in their policies, regulations, and guidelines, and used various methods to mark and publicize their activities. However, we identified some challenges to marking and publicizing U.S. foreign assistance, including the lack of a strategy for assessing the impact of marking and publicity efforts on public awareness and the lack of governmentwide guidance for marking and publicizing U.S. foreign aid. To better ensure that recipients of U.S. foreign assistance are aware that the aid is provided by the United States and its taxpayers, we recommended that State, in consultation with other U.S. government agencies, (1) develop a strategy to better assess the impact of marking and publicity programs on public awareness and (2) establish interagency agreements for marking and publicizing all U.S. foreign assistance. State indicated that the interagency public diplomacy strategy will address assessment of marking and publicity programs and will include governmentwide marking and publicity guidance.

Private Sector Engagement
Strategy Not Yet Developed

In 2005, we noted that State's efforts to engage the private sector in pursuit of common public diplomacy objectives had met with mixed success and recommended that the Secretary develop a strategy to guide these efforts. Since then, State has established an Office of Private Sector Outreach, is partnering with individuals and the private sector on various projects, and hosted a Private Sector Summit on Public Diplomacy in January 2007. However, State has not yet developed a comprehensive strategy to guide the Department's efforts to engage the private sector.

State Has Established a
Public Diplomacy Strategic
Framework but Lacks
Implementing Guidance

In 2005, the Under Secretary established a strategic framework for U.S. public diplomacy efforts, which includes three priority goals: (1) offer foreign publics a vision of hope and opportunity rooted in the U.S.'s most basic values; (2) isolate and marginalize extremists; and (3) promote understanding regarding shared values and common interests between Americans and peoples of different countries, cultures, and faiths. The Under Secretary noted that she intends to achieve these goals using five tactics—engagement, exchanges, education, empowerment, and evaluation—and by using various public diplomacy programs and other means, including coordinating outreach efforts with the private sector. This framework partially responds to our 2003 recommendation that State should develop and disseminate a strategy to integrate its public diplomacy efforts and direct them toward achieving common objectives. State has not yet developed written guidance that provides details on how these five tactics will be used to implement the Under Secretary's priority goals. However, it should be noted that the Under Secretary has issued limited guidance regarding the goal of countering extremism to 18 posts selected to participate in a pilot initiative focusing on this objective.

Posts Lack a Campaign-
Style Approach to
Communications

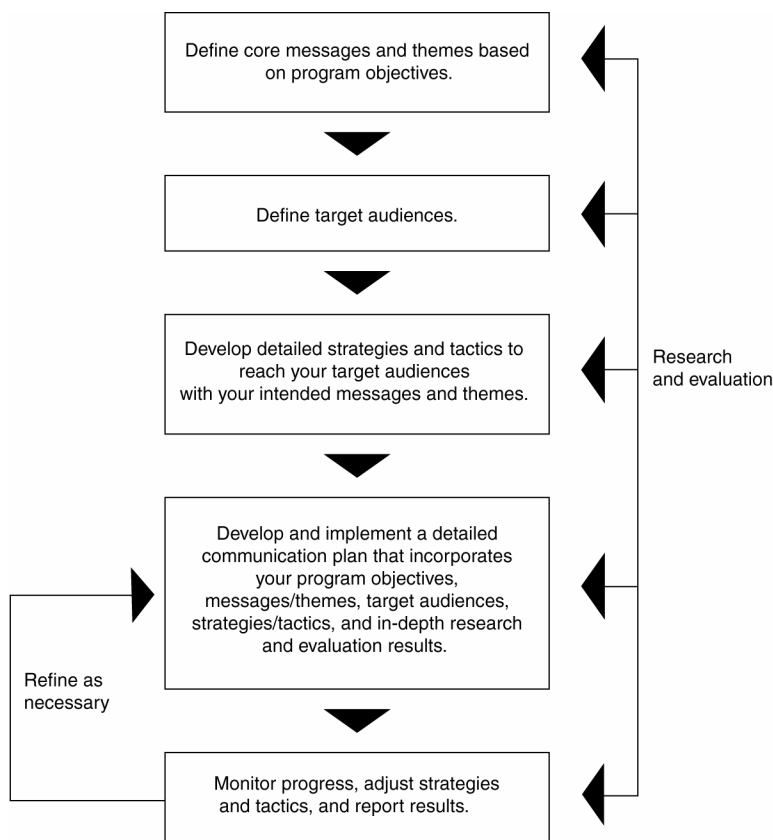
We have recommended that State, where appropriate, adopt strategic communication best practices (which we refer to as the "campaign-style approach")⁵ and develop country-specific communication plans⁶ that incorporate the key steps embodied in this approach. As shown in figure 2,

⁵In contrast to State, we believe that these key elements have been largely adopted by both the Department of Defense and the U.S. Agency for International Development to help guide their thematic communication efforts directed at foreign audiences.

⁶Prior to 1999, when public diplomacy efforts were managed by the former U.S. Information Agency, detailed communication plans were developed on a country-by-country basis. These plans included details on core messages and themes, target audiences, and research on key opinion leaders, audience attitudes, and the local media environment.

these steps include defining the core message, identifying and segmenting target audiences, developing detailed communication strategies and tactics, and using research and evaluation to inform and re-direct efforts as needed. As noted in our May 2006 report, our review of public diplomacy operations in Nigeria, Pakistan, and Egypt in 2006 found that this approach and corresponding communication plans were absent. Rather, post public diplomacy efforts constituted an ad hoc collection of activities designed to support such broad goals as promoting mutual understanding.

Figure 2: Key Elements of Campaign-style Communication Efforts



Source: GAO.

In a recent development, 18 posts participating in the department's pilot countries initiative have developed country-level plans focusing on the

countering extremism goal.⁷ These plans were developed on the basis of a template issued by the Under Secretary that requires each post to provide a list of supporting objectives, a description of the media environment, identification of key target audiences, and a list of supporting programs and activities. We reviewed most of the plans submitted in response to this guidance. Although useful as a high-level planning exercise, these plans do not adhere to the campaign-style approach, which requires a level of rigor and detail that normally exceeds the three- to four-page plans produced by posts in pilot countries. The plans omit basic elements, such as specific core messages and themes or any substantive evidence that proposed communication programs were driven by detailed audience research—one of the key principles embodied in the campaign-style approach. In the absence of such research, programs may lack important information about appropriate target audiences and credible messages and messengers.

State Is Making a Concerted Effort to Better Measure Program Performance and Impact

Based on prior reports by GAO and others, the department has begun to institute a more concerted effort to measure the impact of its programs and activities. The department created (1) the Office of Policy, Planning, and Resources within the office of the Under Secretary; (2) the Public Diplomacy Evaluation Council to share best practices; and (3) a unified Public Diplomacy Evaluation Office. The Department established an expanded evaluation schedule that is designed to cover all major public diplomacy programs. The department also has called on program managers to analyze and define their key inputs, activities, outputs, outcomes, and impact to help identify meaningful performance goals and indicators. Finally, the department recently launched a pilot public diplomacy performance measurement data collection project that is designed to collect, document, and quantify reliable annual and long-term outcome performance measures to support government reporting requirements.

⁷This exercise has now been broadened, and posts around the world are developing similar country-level plans targeting their key public diplomacy objectives.

BBG Has Strategy for International Broadcasting, but Audience Data May be Misleading

In 2001, the BBG introduced a market-based approach to international broadcasting that sought to “marry the mission to the market.” This approach was designed to generate large listening audiences in priority markets that the BBG believes it must reach to effectively meet its mission. Implementing this strategy has focused on markets relevant to the war on terrorism, in particular in the Middle East through such key initiatives as Radio Sawa and the Alhurra TV network. The Board’s vision is to create a flexible, multimedia, research-driven U.S. international broadcasting system.

We found that the BBG’s strategic plan to implement its new approach did not include a single goal or related program objective designed to gauge progress toward increasing audience size, even though its strategy focuses on the need to reach large audiences in priority markets. The BBG subsequently created a single strategic goal to focus on the key objective of maximizing impact in priority areas of interest to the United States and made audience size a key performance measure. However, in our August 2006 review of the Middle East Broadcasting Networks, we found that methodological concerns call into question the potential accuracy of this key performance measure with regard to Radio Sawa’s listening rates and Alhurra’s viewing rates. Specifically, we found that weaknesses in the BBG’s audience surveys create uncertainty over whether some of Radio Sawa’s or Alhurra’s performance targets for audience size have been met. We recommended that the BBG improve its audience research methods, including identifying significant methodological limitations. The BBG accepted our recommendation and has informed us that it is currently considering how it will do so.

A Number of Internal and External Challenges Hamper U.S. Public Diplomacy Activities

Public diplomacy efforts in the field face several other challenges. Beginning with our September 2003 report on State’s public diplomacy efforts, post officials have consistently cited several key challenges, including a general lack of staff, insufficient administrative support, and inadequate language training. Furthermore, public diplomacy officers struggle to balance security with public access and outreach to local populations. Finally, the BBG’s disparate organizational structure has been viewed as a key management challenge that significantly complicates its efforts to focus and direct U.S. international broadcasting efforts.

Insufficient Staff and Lack of Staff Time Hinders Public Diplomacy Activities

Although several recent reports on public diplomacy have recommended an increase in U.S. public diplomacy program spending, several embassy officials stated that, with current staffing levels, they do not have the capacity to effectively utilize increased funds. According to State, the Department had 887 established public diplomacy positions (overseas and domestic) as of March 31, 2007, but 199, or roughly 22 percent, were vacant. Compounding this challenge is the loss of public diplomacy officers to temporary duty in Iraq, which, according to one State official, has drawn down field officers even further. Staffing shortages may also limit the amount of training public diplomacy officers receive. State is repositioning several public diplomacy officers as part of its transformational diplomacy initiative. However, this effort represents shifting existing public diplomacy officers and does not increase the overall number of officers, which we have noted were generally the same in fiscal years 2004 and 2006.

In addition, public diplomacy officers at posts are burdened with administrative tasks, and thus have less time to conduct public diplomacy outreach activities than they did previously. One senior State official said that administrative duties, such as budget, personnel, and internal reporting, compete with officers' public diplomacy responsibilities. Another official in Egypt stated that she rarely had enough time to strategize, plan, or evaluate her programs. These statements echo comments we heard during overseas fieldwork and in a survey for our 2003 report. In that survey, officers stated that, although they manage to attend public outreach and other functions within their host country capitals, it was particularly difficult to find time to travel outside the capitals to interact with other communities. This challenge is compounded at posts with short tours of duty, including many tours in the Muslim world, as officials stated that it is difficult to establish the type of close working relationships essential to effective public diplomacy work when they are in country for only a short time. In our May 2006 report, we reported that the average length of tour at posts in the Muslim world is about 22 percent shorter than tour lengths elsewhere. Noting the prevalence of 1-year tours in the Muslim world, a senior official at State said that public affairs officers who have shorter tours tend to produce less effective work than officers with longer tours.

To address these challenges, we recommended in 2003 that the Secretary of State designate more administrative positions to overseas public affairs sections to reduce the administrative burden. Officials at State said that the Management bureau is currently considering options for reducing the

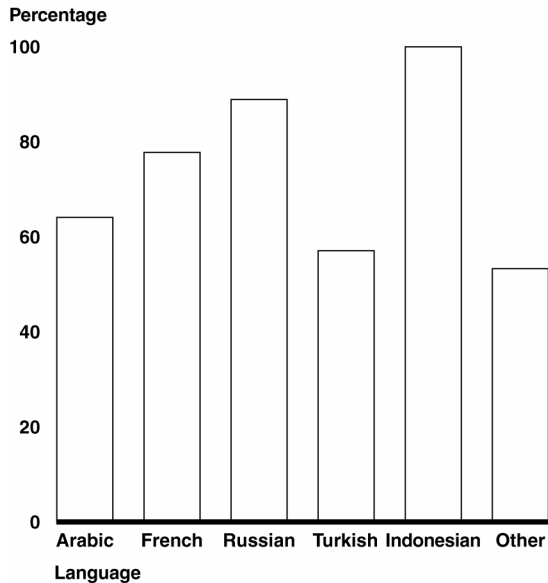
administrative burden on posts, including the development of centralized administrative capabilities offshore.

Language Deficiencies Continue, Especially in the Muslim World

In August 2006, GAO reported that the State Department continued to experience significant foreign language proficiency shortfalls in countries around the world.⁸ Our May 2006 report noted this problem was particularly acute at posts in the Muslim world where Arabic—classified as a “superhard” language by State—predominates. In countries with significant Muslim populations, we reported that 30 percent of language-designated public diplomacy positions were filled by officers without the requisite proficiency in those languages, compared with 24 percent elsewhere. In Arabic language posts, about 36 percent of language-designated public diplomacy positions were filled by staff unable to speak Arabic at the designated level. In addition, State officials said that there are even fewer officers who are willing or able to speak on television or engage in public debate in Arabic. The information officer in Cairo stated that his office does not have enough Arabic speakers to engage the Egyptian media effectively. Figure 3 shows the percentage of public diplomacy positions in the Muslim world staffed by officers meeting language requirements.

⁸GAO, *Department of State: Staffing and Foreign Language Shortfalls Persist Despite Initiatives to Address Gaps*, [GAO-06-894](#) (Washington, D.C.: Aug. 4, 2006).

Figure 3: Percentage of Filled Language-Designated Public Diplomacy Positions in the Muslim World Staffed by Officers Meeting Language Requirements (as of August 2005)



Source: State Department.

State has begun to address these language deficiencies by increasing its overall amount of language training and providing supplemental training for more difficult languages at overseas locations. State has also made efforts to ensure that its public diplomacy staff receive appropriate language training. For example, State’s Foreign Service Institute recently offered a week of intensive media training for language-qualified officers that provided guidance on how to communicate with Arabic-speaking audiences.

Embassies Must Balance Security and Public Outreach

Security concerns have limited embassy outreach efforts and public access, forcing public diplomacy officers to strike a balance between safety and mission. Shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, then-Secretary of State Colin Powell stated, “Safety is one of our top priorities...but it can’t be at the expense of the mission.” In our May 2006 report we noted that security concerns are particularly elevated in countries with significant Muslim populations, where the threat level for terrorism is rated as “critical” or “high” in 80 percent of posts.

Security and budgetary concerns have led to the closure of publicly accessible facilities around the world, such as American Centers and Libraries. In Pakistan, for example, all American Centers have closed for security reasons; the last facility, in Islamabad, closed in February 2005. These same concerns have prevented establishing a U.S. presence elsewhere. As a result, embassies have had to find other venues for public diplomacy programs, and some activities have been moved onto embassy compounds, where precautions designed to improve security have had the ancillary effect of sending the message that the United States is unapproachable and distrustful, according to State officials. Concrete barriers and armed escorts contribute to this perception, as do requirements restricting visitors' use of cell phones and pagers within the embassy. According to one official in Pakistan, visitors to the embassy's reference library have declined to as few as one per day because many visitors feel humiliated by the embassy's rigorous security procedures.

Other public diplomacy programs have had to limit their publicity to reduce the risk of becoming a target. A recent joint USAID-State report concluded that "security concerns often require a 'low profile' approach during events, programs or other situations, which, in happier times, would have been able to generate considerable good will for the United States." This constraint is particularly acute in Pakistan, where the embassy has had to reduce certain speaker and exchange programs.

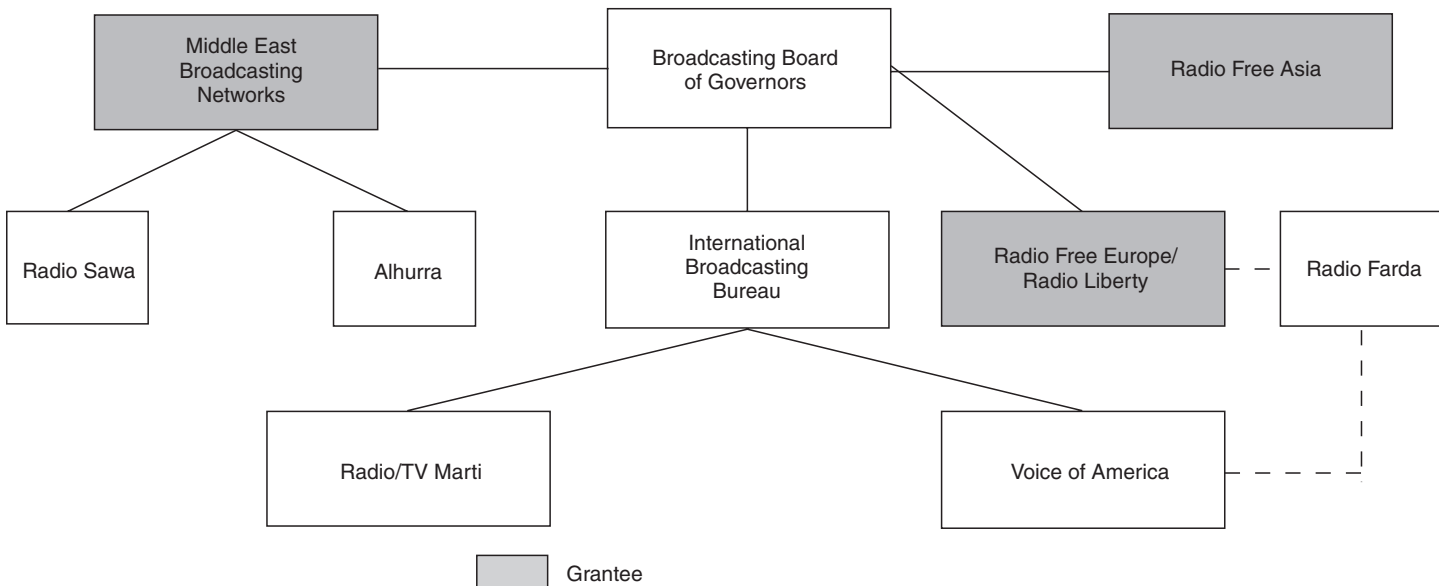
State has responded to security concerns and the loss of publicly accessible facilities through a variety of initiatives, including American Corners, which are centers that provide information about the United States, hosted in local institutions and staffed by local employees. According to State data, there are currently 365 American Corners throughout the world, including more than 200 in the Muslim world, with another 31 planned (more than 20 of which will be in the Muslim world). However, two of the posts we visited in October 2005 were having difficulty finding hosts for American Corners, as local institutions fear becoming terrorist targets.

Disparate Structure and Management Concerns Challenge the Broadcasting Board of Governors

The Broadcasting Board of Governors has its own set of public diplomacy challenges, including trying to gain large audiences in priority markets while dealing with a disparate organizational structure that contains multiple discrete broadcasters (see fig. 4). As noted in the BBG's strategic plan, "the diversity of the BBG—diverse organizations with different missions, different frameworks, and different constituencies—makes it a challenge to bring all the separate parts together in a more effective

whole.” As we reported in July 2003, the Board hoped to address this key challenge through two primary means. First, it planned to treat the component parts of U.S. international broadcasting as a single system with the Board in the position of actively managing resources across broadcast entities to achieve common broadcast goals. Second, it intended to realign the BBG’s organizational structure to reinforce the Board’s role as CEO with a host of responsibilities, including taking the lead role in shaping the BBG’s overall strategic direction, setting expectations and standards, and creating the context for innovation and change.

Figure 4: Organization of the BBG



Source: BBG.

Note: RFE/RL and VOA jointly produce Radio Farda, a Persian language service broadcast to Iran.

In addition, in 2006, we found that MBN, which received \$79 million in funding in fiscal year 2006, faces several managerial and editorial challenges that may hinder the organization’s efforts to expand in their highly competitive market. While MBN has taken steps to improve its process of program review and evaluation, it has not yet implemented our recommendations to improve its system of internal control or develop a comprehensive staff training plan.

Mr. Chairman, this concludes my prepared statement. I would be happy to respond to any questions you or other members of the subcommittee may have at this time.

Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

For questions regarding this testimony, please contact Jess T. Ford at (202) 512-4128 or fordj@gao.gov. Individuals making key contributions to this statement include Audrey Solis, Assistant Director; Michael ten Kate; Eve Weisberg; Kate France Smiles; and Joe Carney.

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