Editorial

Geopolitics, Public Diplomacy and Soft Power

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As we have bid farewell to the George W. Bush administration, it seems highly appropriate to be publishing this special issue on geopolitics, public diplomacy, and ‘soft power’ with specific reference to the Middle East. In light of the ongoing ‘war on terror’ and the occupation of Iraq, attention has turned again to how countries such as the United States can use soft power to influence not only domestic communities but also countries in the Middle East and elsewhere. Inevitably, the role of the media, whether in the form of radio, television, or film, looms large in such debates. The United States, for example, has funded new radio stations such as Radio Farda and Radio Sawa in an attempt to influence Farsi- and Arabic-speaking audiences in Iran and the Arab world. The Middle East has, as a consequence of American geopolitical fears of both Islamist militancy and Iranian power projection, emerged as the critical space for such popular cultural expressions. In the context of the Middle East, geopolitical representations are rarely politically innocent.

It is now something of a bien pensant cliché to remark that the US-led ‘war on terror’ and successive rounds of accompanying public diplomacy did little to persuade skeptics in the West and the Middle East that the invasion of Iraq was legitimate and necessary (see, for example, Sands 2008). While few would defend the hideous nature of the Saddam Hussein regime, the manner in which so much US-led activity in the Middle East has been carried out has invited widespread opprobrium. Prison abuse, the use of torture, the undermining of the United Nations and the circumvention of international conventions regarding the treatment of prisoners are just some of the litany of complaints and grievances felt towards the very country which was at the heart of the creation of the United Nations and a new world order some sixty years ago (Sands 2004).
By the time this special issue appears in print, President Obama will have enjoyed his first hundred days in office. Whatever the outcome of his first administration, his election has been widely welcomed as a sign that the American electorate (or at least a proportion of those who voted) has been willing not only to elect the first African-American to the Oval Office but also to reject President Bush’s aggressive policies overseas. And it is possible, as Joseph Nye (2008: xi) noted before the 2008 presidential election, that Obama’s personal charisma may well be a very important part of rehabilitating America’s soft power. President Obama faces some tough challenges ranging from the fate of the international economic order to regional issues including the long-running Israeli-Palestinian dispute and the nature of Iran’s nuclear status within the region. On top of that, we would have to add policy-related challenges over the future stability of Iraq and Afghanistan alongside relations with other states such as Syria. Such is the expectation surrounding the Obama administration that he and his team, including Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, will inevitably disappoint supporters hoping for radical changes within a four- or even eight-year time frame.

One of the greatest obstacles facing the United States in the post-Bush era is its public reputation in the world and in particular the Middle East. The ‘war on terror’ has done incalculable damage to the reputation of the country as a model liberal democracy committed to spreading liberal values around the world. Moreover, in the context of the Islamic world, its steadfast support for Israel is deeply troubling. The recent Israeli bombing of Gaza, following the bombardment of Lebanon in 2006, has provoked much anger worldwide. While mindful of the threat posed by rockets fired into Israel, the latter’s armed forces stand accused of indulging in indiscriminate and disproportionate use of force. The United States’ unwavering support for Israel in 2008 (let alone 2006) has not helped restore America’s reputation in the Islamic world.

Repairing America’s reputation in the Middle East, and the Islamic world more generally, will take time and a great deal of judicious public diplomacy. Fortunately, for President Obama, the last administration provided a great number of examples of how not to engage in efficacious public diplomacy. These include the so-called 2001-2 ‘Shared Values’ campaign, which saw the Department of State embark on an initiative designed to show the world that Muslim Americans enjoyed a decent life in places like Dearborn, Michigan. Unfortunately, for most Muslim observers, their anger at America was not because of what was occurring in the Mid-West but in the West Bank. The decision to fund international broadcasting enterprises such as Radio Sawa and Al-Hurra television were less than successful not least because American-funded media channels enjoy little to no credibility with key audiences in