

**“Flag on the Bag? Branding Foreign Assistance  
and the Struggle Against Violent Extremism”**

Prepared Statement of Dr. Kristin M. Lord  
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**November 18, 2009**

**House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Terrorism, Nonproliferation and Trade**

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Royce, Distinguished Members of the Subcommittee:

It is a true honor to appear before you today to discuss the branding of foreign assistance and its place in the struggle against violent extremism. As the first speaker on this panel, I will summarize some of the benefits of publicizing foreign assistance. I will also sound notes of caution.

Violent extremism is a complex phenomenon with many causes. It is sustained by a dangerous potion of ideology, political grievance, economic deprivation, social marginalization, and the lure of tightly knit groups bound by a common cause.

It is also sustained by anti-Americanism. Widespread anti-American sentiment provides fertile ground for extremist ideologies and makes it harder to accomplish American foreign policy objectives including, but not limited to, countering terrorism. Support for terrorist networks like al Qaeda is waning in many predominantly Muslim societies. Nonetheless, violent extremists still find it all too easy to translate anti-American attitudes into tangible benefits such as money, safe havens, new recruits, and moral support.

Anti-American attitudes remain prevalent despite positive reactions to the election of President Obama. Indeed, just 27% of Egyptians, 25% of Jordanians, and 16% of Pakistanis hold favorable views of the United States according to polls released in July by the Pew Global Attitudes Project.<sup>1</sup>

These attitudes mystify many Americans who see the large amounts of financial assistance Americans provide to those in need, particularly in predominantly Muslim societies in the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, or recall the military commitments our country has made to defend Muslim populations residing in Kuwait and the Balkans. If the world just knew how much good we do, some argue, anti-American attitudes would subside and violent extremists would find less fertile ground for their vicious ideologies. Americans and predominantly Muslim societies around the world would find it easier to work together in order to counter common threats and find solutions to shared problems.

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This argument presumes that anti-Americanism stems from a fundamental lack of awareness about our country’s good intentions and actions. For those who hold this belief, a logical extension is to recommend that the United States should build greater awareness of American assistance overseas by both branding and publicizing foreign assistance -- that our nation should visibly put the American “flag on the bag” of aid. The recommendations of the 2007 HELP Commission illustrate this perspective, calling on the United States to “stop being shy about the substantial contributions it makes to development,” and underscoring that “informing the public in developing countries about U.S. assistance to their country is a vital element of our foreign policy.”<sup>2</sup>

**Benefits of Branding**

Indeed, solid empirical evidence suggests that, at least in cases of two significant humanitarian disasters, foreign assistance did improve public opinion towards the United States. After U.S. assistance to victims of the 2004 tsunami, for instance, the percentage of Indonesians expressing favorable views of the United States increased from 15% in 2003 to 38% in 2005.<sup>3</sup> After U.S. assistance to victims of the 2005 earthquake in Pakistan, the percentage of Pakistanis reporting favorable views of the United States rose from 21% in 2004 to 27% in 2006.<sup>4</sup> According to survey data, U.S. humanitarian assistance led directly to this change in public opinion regarding the United States. According to the non-profit group Terror Free Tomorrow, 63% of Indonesians and 78% of Pakistanis reported having a more favorable opinion *because* of that assistance.<sup>5</sup>

**Reasons for Caution**

Yet, we should not over-learn the lesson that foreign assistance leads to more favorable public opinion.

- First, the data linking aid and favorable public opinion is extremely limited and largely focused on large-scale disaster relief, which could be a special case. Though USAID has conducted analyses of public opinion before and after communications campaigns in recent years, such studies are the exception, have surveyed only limited audiences, and have not tracked the impact of foreign assistance on public opinion over sustained periods of time. If we are honest with ourselves, we actually have very little empirical evidence to justify a faith in branding.
- Second, favorable reactions to humanitarian assistance seem to have a relatively short shelf life. Only a year after delivering earthquake aid, only 15% of Pakistanis reported

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favorable opinions toward the United States – a lower percentage than the years immediately before the aid was delivered.<sup>6</sup> In addition, while 38% of Indonesians reported favorable views of the United States after the tsunami, that percentage soon dropped to just 29% in 2007.<sup>7</sup>

- Third, the link between foreign assistance and more favorable public opinion is far from clear cut. The recent announcement of a \$7.5 billion aid package to Pakistan, the Kerry-Lugar bill, was met by widespread outrage – not gratitude -- due to Pakistani perceptions that mandatory protections against corruption were too intrusive.<sup>8</sup> To give another example, only 27% of Egyptians hold favorable opinions of the United States though Egypt has received nearly \$70 billion in U.S. aid since 1975.<sup>9</sup> Despite the fact that Egypt is the second largest recipient of U.S. foreign assistance,<sup>10</sup> a full 76% of Egyptians believe that the goal of U.S. policy in the Middle East is to weaken and divide Islam.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to being careful not to draw unwarranted conclusions about the relationship between aid and opinion, there are special circumstances when our government should consider carefully whether to brand or publicize foreign assistance at all.

- When the lives of aid workers are placed in jeopardy due to their association with U.S. assistance programs, the protection of these individuals should weigh heavily against the desire to claim credit.
- In the midst of active counterinsurgency campaigns such as the current war in Afghanistan, questions of how and whether to brand assistance should be evaluated in the context of broader security, political, and cultural considerations. In these circumstances America’s strategic success, not to mention American lives, depends on strengthening public confidence in the indigenous government and its ability to deliver services to the population. Thus, the United States should maintain enough flexibility in its branding guidelines to make sure it is not undermining its own wartime strategy.

### **How Not Whether**

In most instances, the real question will be not *whether* to brand or publicize foreign assistance but *how*. Americans generally should embrace transparency and take steps to make foreign publics aware of assistance provided by our nation. But we should not undermine our own objectives by giving the appearance that we are only providing assistance in order to improve our own popularity. U.S. representatives overseas should take

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care not to create the impression that the United States gives aid only to get something in return. Where U.S. foreign assistance is unpopular, those perceptions often arise due to beliefs that aid is an attempt to meddle in the affairs of another society, perhaps with malign intent. Spreading knowledge of U.S. assistance without addressing perceptions about *why* assistance is being provided is time ill spent.

There are numerous steps the United States can take to ensure that foreign assistance not only achieves its development objectives but also helps to strengthen relationships between the United States and foreign societies in the process.<sup>12</sup> Using communication strategies tailored to each individual circumstance, our government can, for instance, work closely and visibly with foreign partners, engage trusted voices such as diaspora communities, test communications campaigns in advance to make sure that the message intended is the message received, and ensure that we communicate in ways that respect local norms and cultural sensitivities.

### **Conclusion**

The United States gives foreign aid for many reasons unrelated to public opinion – *and should continue to do so*. Improving foreign opinions about the United States is only one, and not even the most important, reason why the United States provides assistance to foreign countries. Though assistance can and should play a role in improving America’s relations with the world, public diplomacy should not drive American development policy. Branding foreign assistance is appropriate in most instances. But it should be done carefully lest our nation undermine the very objectives we are trying to achieve.

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Global Attitudes Project, “Most Muslim Publics Not So Easily Moved: Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S Image Around the World” (23 July 2009), at <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/264.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Helping to Enhance the Livelihood of People Around the Globe (the HELP Commission), *Beyond Assistance* (December 2007): 29-33.

<sup>3</sup> Pew Global Attitudes Project, “American Character Gets Mixed Reviews: U.S. Image Up Slightly, But Still Negative” (23 June 2007), at <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/247.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight Committee on Foreign Affairs U.S. House of Representatives, *America’s Image in the World: Findings from the Pew Global Attitudes Project Testimony of Andrew Kohut* (14 March 2007): 2,9.

<sup>5</sup> Terror Free Tomorrow, “Poll: Dramatic Change of Public Opinion in the Muslim World” (November 2005), at <http://www.terrorfreetomorrow.org/articlenav.php?id=71>

<sup>6</sup> Pew Global Attitudes Project, “Most Muslim Publics Not So Easily Moved: Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S Image Around the World” (23 July 2009), at <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/264.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Omar Waraich, “How a U.S Aid Package to Pakistan Could Threaten Zardari,” *Time Magazine* (8 October 2009).

<sup>9</sup> Congressional Research Service, *Egypt-United States Relations* (15 June 2005). <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/IB93087.pdf>

And

Congressional Research Service, U.S. Foreign Assistance to the Middle East: Historical Background, Recent Trends, and the FY2010 Request (17 July 2009). <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/IB93087.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Pew Global Attitudes Project, “Most Muslim Publics Not So Easily Moved: Confidence in Obama Lifts U.S Image Around the World” (23 July 2009), at <http://pewglobal.org/reports/pdf/264.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> WorldPublicOpinion.org, “Egyptian Public to Greet Obama With Suspicion” (3 June 2009), at <http://www.worldpublicopinion.org/pipa/articles/brmiddleeastnafricara/613.php>

<sup>12</sup> As recommended by the Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Aid, USAID should invest in more consistent, effective, and systematic polling and focus groups to determine public reactions to U.S. foreign assistance and the best methods of communicating with foreign publics in order to accomplish both development and public diplomacy objectives. See Advisory Committee on Voluntary Foreign Aid, *From the American People: Why the Story that U.S. Foreign Assistance is Working Must be Told* (November 2008).