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## **Bush's Friend Takes US Spin to Mideast.**

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Announcing the appointment of Karen Hughes to marshal the communication of US policies to the world, Condoleezza Rice, secretary of state, declared: "We must do more to confront hateful propaganda, dispel dangerous myths and get out the truth."

On her first tour of the Middle East which ended yesterday, Mrs Hughes, under secretary for public diplomacy and a close friend of President George W. Bush, has shown energy and passion in getting the US message across to a foreign audience. One of her initiatives in the mind war against extremism has been to set up "rapid reaction SWAT" teams that will monitor foreign reports and respond immediately in the same news cycle to falsehoods and incitement.

However, on her tour of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Turkey she has repeatedly puzzled her audiences with her or the administration's own interpretation of history and current events.

In almost every speech or interview, Mrs Hughes has sought to dispel the widely held belief that the US is pro-Israel, by stating that Mr Bush was the first American president to declare US support for an independent Palestinian state.

For example, in an interview with al-Jazeera, the Arabic television network that has been criticised by the administration for its perceived anti-American bias, Mrs Hughes said: "President Bush is the first president in the history of America to say we believe the Palestinians should have a state, living side by side in peace with Israel." Yet, on January 7 2001, in a policy speech in New York then President Bill Clinton laid out what were known as the "Clinton parameters" and declared: "First, I think there can be no genuine resolution to the conflict without a sovereign, viable Palestinian state that accommodates Israel's security requirements and the demographic realities."

Speaking on her way back to the US yesterday, Mrs Hughes stood by her assertion. She said she had called David Welch, assistant secretary for the Middle East, and he had confirmed Mr Bush was the first US president to say "we support two states living side by side". "I refer you to David," she said.

Another subject raised by Arab interlocutors with Mrs Hughes was the treatment of detainees at the US prison in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Her reply that the International Committee of the Red Cross had "24-hour access" to the prison and the implication that this was a guarantee of good treatment have provoked objections from the Geneva-based organisation.

Antonella Notari, spokeswoman for the ICRC, described Mrs Hughes' remarks as "very troubling". She added: "We are not part of the Guantanamo system. We come in regularly to monitor the situation. We certainly should not serve as an argument by anybody to say that things are fine or not fine in Guantanamo."

Events in the less recent past are also subject to spin. Defending the 2003 invasion of Iraq, part of Mrs Hughes' argument is that Saddam Hussein's forces fired on US aircraft that she said were enforcing sanctions.

Analysts said that strictly speaking this could be said to be true, but they also pointed out that no United Nations Security Council resolution specifically mandated the "no-fly" zones in Iraq that were unilaterally imposed by the US, UK and France after the 1991 Gulf war.

Kofi Annan, UN secretary general, at the time also joined Russia, China and others in challenging US assertions that Iraq had violated Resolution 1441 by firing on US and British aircraft enforcing the no-fly zones.

Independent observers who have joined Mrs Hughes on her "listening tour" do not question her sincerity in seeking to bridge the gap between the US and the Middle East that has seen America's popularity ratings plummet to unprecedented lows since the invasion of Iraq. When she speaks with great feeling about her son, her audiences have generally reacted warmly to her assertions of the "values" that America shares with their cultures.

However, knowing that this is the first time Mrs Hughes has ever set foot in the Middle East, they question the depth of her knowledge or the sincerity of the officials who briefed her.