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U.S. Outreach to Islamic World Gets Slow Start, Minus Leaders

Effort Involves No Muslims; Hughes Will Not Arrive Until Fall

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April 18, 2005

The Bush administration's outreach to the Islamic world is in no hurry. And it includes no Muslims.

Karen Hughes, who was appointed a month ago to craft a bold new approach for U.S. public diplomacy, is not expected to take the job until as late as the fall, according to administration and congressional sources. The delay is already undermining U.S. credibility, with a well-placed U.S. official warning about "the gap between rhetoric and reality."

Dina Powell, the new No. 2 official in charge of public diplomacy, is also not expected to take the job for at least two more months, administration sources say.

The delay comes as a Government Accountability Office report released this month criticized the administration for failing to develop a strategy to improve the image of the United States as "recent polling data show that anti-Americanism is spreading and deepening around the world."

"Such anti-American sentiments can increase foreign public support for terrorism directed at Americans, impact the cost and effectiveness of military operations, weaken the United States' ability to align with other nations in pursuit of common policy objectives, and dampen foreign publics' enthusiasm for U.S. business services and products," the report warned.

Despite the administration's repeated pledges of outreach, the State Department's main program directed at the Islamic world has no Muslim staff, U.S. officials say. "There's a dearth of Muslims in the State Department generally," a senior State Department official said. Like Powell, who is Egyptian American, most Arabs in the administration are Christians, sources said.

Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the United States and is expected to become the second-largest religious bloc here in the next few years, but the government has not tapped into its own community as part of the global outreach, U.S. officials say.

"It's very important for American Muslims to be involved, as they're an important conduit to the wider Islamic world and they should be speaking out," the second U.S. official added. "But American Muslims generally feel they're not included like other communities. We should be talking to them, as they have a lot of knowledge of the region."

The failure to include American Muslims has sparked criticism from Middle East and democracy experts. "You can do Muslim outreach without Muslims and it doesn't mean Dina Powell can't be effective, but the administration has not made much effort to integrate Muslim Americans in this effort," said Thomas Carothers, director of the democracy project at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The administration has appointed only two American Muslims to top jobs -- only one in foreign policy. Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan American, is the former ambassador to Afghanistan and the nominee to be the new ambassador to Iraq. Elias A. Zerhouni, an Algerian American, is director of the National Institutes of Health.

The most successful program, U.S. officials say, is the State Department's media outreach, which organizes interviews with journalists in Muslim countries of senior U.S. officials, including

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and new democracy czar Elizabeth Cheney. It has organized more interviews this year than in all of 2004.

But analysts say media exposure is not enough. "There's deep confusion within the administration about what public diplomacy means. For some, it's simply selling America's image in the world," Carothers said. "For others, it's something deeper that has to do with creating a partnership between America and Muslim countries to replace the current antagonism."

Media exposure without addressing the issues that sparked the divide may deepen the problem, he warned. Those issues include detainees held without access to judges at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; visa restrictions for Muslims who want to study or tour the United States; and erratic involvement in Arab-Israeli peace efforts.

"The administration is convinced that if only the Muslim world understood us better they'd like us more, whereas many Muslims feel it's precisely because they understand us that they're unhappy," Carothers said.

Hughes's surprise appointment on March 15 as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy was expected to generate new momentum and high-profile initiatives to the Islamic world. At the time, President Bush said that "spreading the universal principle of human liberty," particularly to the Muslim world, was a key component of the war on terrorism. "Hughes has been one of my most trusted and closest advisers, she has the experience, expertise and judgment to lead this critical effort." Picking one of his most trusted aides "signifies my personal commitment to the international diplomacy that is needed," he said.

Public diplomacy, Vice President Cheney told The Washington Post a week later, "has been a very weak part of our arsenal," but "having Karen Hughes over there," with Powell and Rice, "gives us the best combination of people [to] actively and aggressively address those issues."

The delay is tied to Hughes's family, U.S. officials said. She left as White House communications director in 2002 for family reasons and moved back to Texas, but her son will head to college in the fall.

Hughes and Powell also face Senate confirmation, which may require two months or more, as neither has been confirmed before. The administration has not sent the initial paperwork for either nominee to the Senate, and there is no indication it will be sent soon, congressional sources say.