CHAPTER 14

Do Peace Corps Volunteers Do Public Diplomacy?

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This study compares the Peace Corps and public diplomacy: their stated goals, their actual functions, and how the practitioners view themselves and each other. It uses case studies from the two countries in the Arab world that today have both Peace Corps and public diplomacy programs, namely, Jordan and Morocco. Public diplomacy is crucial in the Arab world, but what is the function of Peace Corps Jordan and Morocco from a public diplomacy perspective? Using the U.S. State Department’s public diplomacy efforts, both in general and in Jordan and Morocco specifically, as a baseline for comparison, this essay argues that Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) do engage in public diplomacy: PCVs are employed by the U.S. government, two of their overarching goals parallel those of the Public Diplomacy Cone of the U.S. State Department, and their activities in Jordan and Morocco complement U.S. public diplomacy aims in those countries. However, Peace Corps Volunteers are not primarily public diplomacy actors, for two reasons. The first is that their goals include development goals. The second is that their power and credibility in public diplomacy ironically comes from their separation from the policies of the U.S. government and their focus on activities other than specifically public diplomacy projects. This essay presents some recommendations that would help Volunteers walk such a thin line.
Public Diplomacy Issues in Jordan and Morocco

Many of the issues that public diplomacy officials deal with in Jordan and Morocco are the same as those being handled by U.S. public diplomacy officials all over the world, including democracy, freedom, and the environment. Public Affairs sections also support the goals of the local mission, such as economic, social, and political reform, counter-terrorism, and public outreach in Morocco.

One of the biggest issues that Public Affairs officers confront in Jordan and Morocco is opposition to American foreign policy, particularly policy toward the region. A particular challenge is the large amount of high-quality, highly effective media available in those countries. American foreign policy is a hot topic and is discussed frequently on the most popular broadcasting stations, on the most popular shows. There may be twenty-five hours a week of popular news and discussion shows where U.S. policy is discussed with three or more guests each, and it is unrealistic for the U.S. Embassy to provide representation on every one. The embassy might be represented in one or two shows per week, but guests on other shows are almost exclusively anti-U.S. policy. Some public diplomacy officers seek to affect the media directly by appearing on popular shows, others indirectly influence local people who may appear on television and have positive things to say about America, or otherwise help educate target populations.

Public Diplomacy Instruments in Jordan and Morocco

Public diplomacy sections use several instruments, such as the America.gov website, in addition to contacts with print and television media staffers. In Morocco, embassies provide media and journalism training and maintain an information resource center. The Access program, in which local teachers teach the English language to youth, is ongoing and very successful in both countries, providing American cultural information along with English lessons.

State Department officials agree that the most effective public diplomacy programs are those that involve dialogue and exchange of ideas. For example, in Morocco, one official felt that “we were really proud of our website, but it was just the beginning.” One program that he found effective was simple. The ambassador would regularly meet with journalists informally over breakfast, off the record. This