

Nov 04, 2016 by **Rob Asghar**

Mr. Bush, Tear Down This Wall ^[1]

Why good razor wire doesn't make good neighbors

The United States Embassy in Islamabad is a wary and reluctant piñata. Scheduled to meet the embassy's cultural affairs officers at 2 pm on a weekday afternoon in late May, I found myself running at least twenty minutes behind as I navigated a labyrinth of razor-wire-topped walls, car inspectors, metal detectors and interrogators.

I had undergone similar scrutiny that morning while visiting the American-run International School of Islamabad, which I had attended from 1978 to 1980. Even though the embassy had been decimated by rioters and the school had been attacked during my time there (chronicled in entire chapters of Steve Coll's *Ghost Wars* and Yaroslav Trofimov's *The Siege of Mecca*), both entities have seemed to grow even more skittish in recent years.

The barricaded school (formerly known as ISI, before that abbreviation became widely associated with Pakistan's notorious intelligence services) has found student recruitment and enrollment to be a challenge since 2002, when U.S. foreign-service personnel were ordered not even to bring their children to Pakistan.

I felt a crushing sorrow, seeing these two great institutions and their employees hunkered down behind high walls. While understanding the need to keep the school safe for whichever local and foreign children continue to attend it, I wondered if the embassy should serve as such a symbol of barbed-tape isolation.

It seems a naïve thought, given past turmoil at the embassy, and especially given the car-bombing of Islamabad's Danish embassy a few days after my departure.

Yet the questions persist. So deep into the communications revolution, the United States does not need a physical permanent diplomatic mission in another land, if such a mission must operate as though it were under perpetual siege. Cell phones, scanners, satellite teleconferences and other technologies will suffice for most intergovernmental initiatives or routine visa requests. And those U.S. representatives who need to be physically present could spread themselves around town discreetly (and, by many accounts, some of them have already begun to do so within Islamabad).

More questions arise, then: Is there a purpose to a permanent diplomatic mission beyond formal, intergovernmental protocol that could be handled in some other fashion? Should an embassy or consulate serve the host population as a window or even a bridge to the sending country? And if so, is it appropriate for the dominant symbols to be razor wire and guns?

Go big or go home, as they say. In coming years, we as Americans may need to become either more bold in our formal diplomacy or just give up. We are currently a half-baked bun, not able to feel safe on South-Asian and Middle-Eastern shores, yet wanting to engage with their citizenries. We can only poke out briefly from behind fortress walls. The United States

has even closed its impressive, centrally located Islamabad Cultural Center that once provided a means for ordinary Pakistanis to connect to American society and American values.

In terms of conducting public diplomacy, the embassy's cultural and public affairs liaisons work bravely and energetically to find other ways to connect with their host population, but their challenge appears to be considerable. They will need more people of Pakistani heritage to assist them in this effort. The best ambassadors for America will be those who can claim to love America while hailing from Pakistan.

The United States currently sends mixed messages to many Pakistanis who would wish to visit or settle in this country. Such persons often feel less welcome than cockroaches, while we as Americans ponder whether they are a safe bet for passage to our shores. Rather than nervously stonewalling such supplicants, we may want to test them more consciously for their eagerness and willingness to serve as ambassadors between our two cultures. Many Pakistani expatriates recognize that making it in America is a privilege that may require a concomitant responsibility to bridge cultures; the time may have come to formalize the invitation and the call.

In an era of enormous tension, such indigenous ambassadorship would require great courage. Yet, if such persons step forward in greater numbers, and enter on behalf of Americans into the town squares of nations such as Pakistan, we would do far better in our diplomacy than by relying on razor-wire-capped brick fortresses.
