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# Public Diplomacy and the Media in the Middle East

By Philip Seib

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## **PUBLIC DIPLOMACY AND THE MEDIA IN THE MIDDLE EAST**

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## **Public Diplomacy and the Media in the Middle East**

Public diplomacy, for purposes of this paper, will be defined tersely: reaching out to global publics directly, rather than through their governments. This can be done in numerous ways, ranging from a micro approach, such as a Peace Corps project in an individual village, to the macro efforts that rely on various forms of mass media.

This latter approach has long been at the heart of public diplomacy. Radio and television have been invaluable political tools for nations that have used them wisely. From the U.S. initiating radio broadcasts on the Voice of America during World War II, to China's recent multi-billion dollar investment in its CCTV, governments have calculated the value of delivering information to people's homes across the globe. In the Arab world, broadcasters such as the BBC and CNN have long offered outsiders' perspectives on events affecting the Middle East, while more recently Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, and other Arab television channels have allowed people in the region to watch the events that affect them through Arab eyes.

This paper examines changes in how the Arab world receives and dispenses public diplomacy since the uprisings that began in 2011. The Middle East media universe has expanded and become more sophisticated in ways that affect Arabs and others.

### **The Al Jazeera Generation**

To appreciate the impact of various forms of media in the Middle East it is necessary to recognize the history of ways that news is delivered in the region and the political influences on that delivery. An important ancestor of today's regional Arab media was *The Voice of the Arabs*, a program first broadcast on Cairo radio in 1953. It soon had its own channel, broadcasting 18 hours a day, and its message was Gamal Abdel Nasser's Arabism—a revolutionary mix of socialism and anti-colonialism that challenged conservative Arab governments.<sup>1</sup> The Egyptian leader was among the first in the region to understand how broadcasting could affect regional politics. Marc Lynch observed that Voice of the Arabs “aimed

primarily at mobilizing pressure from below on rival regimes. Radio broadcasting transformed the potential for Arab political action by bringing Arabist political speech (if not rational discourse) directly to the increasingly mobilized masses.”<sup>2</sup>

The overt political messaging of Voice of the Arabs is only thinly disguised in the broadcasts of its most notable descendants, principally Al Jazeera television. The pan-Arab theme comes across in coverage decisions and talk shows, bringing a certain level of cohesion to the notion of “Arabness.” Faisal Al Kasim, host of Al Jazeera’s talk show *The Opposite Direction*, observed: “If anything, satellite talk shows have brought the Arab masses together and given them a pan-Arab identity. In other words, to a certain extent they have played a nationalist role by narrowing and sometimes bridging divides. In fact, one might argue that popular talk shows on Al Jazeera and other channels have succeeded where Gamal Abdel Nasser failed. Debate programs and live talks on satellite broadcasting are watched avidly by millions of Arabs and are contributing a great deal to the formation of pan-Arab public opinion over many issues. Arab viewers can now share each other’s problems, issues, and concerns.”<sup>3</sup>

Aside from purely political matters that contribute to the popularity of Arab media (although this popularity fluctuates depending on the issues of the day), the cultural significance of Arab news organizations covering the topics most affecting Arabs’ lives is important in understanding the contemporary Middle East media environment. The strength of Al Jazeera, from its inception in 1996, has been that its existence serves as an answer to the question, “Why must we rely on the likes of CNN and the BBC to get news about ourselves?” Qatar-based Al Jazeera capitalized on its indigenous character, as did a slew of additional channels such as Saudi-funded Al Arabiya.

The best of the new Arab channels offer audience-grabbing topics and unprecedentedly high production values. Their “Arabness” is often reflected in coverage. In Al Jazeera’s reporting of the 2008 Olympics, “after an Algerian boxer won silver and an Egyptian Boxer

won bronze, the bulletin headline was ‘New medals for Arabs in Beijing’ and not ‘New medals for Algeria and Egypt in Beijing.’ The item did go on to say the athletes’ countries...but it was the athletes’ Arab character that producers thought would attract maximum attention. Such flagging sends the message that the viewers, like the athletes, are ‘Arab’ and should take pride in the achievements of ‘their’ competitors, even if from a different state. This discourse was repeated throughout Al Jazeera’s Olympic coverage.”<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the most significant characteristic of these broadcasters is that although their news product remains tethered to the policies of their home governments (even if this is sometimes disguised), satellite television is unfettered by physical borders. It reaches into countries where parochial state broadcasters—with their government-controlled content and drab on-air appearance—long were dominant because there were no viable options, but suddenly found themselves unable to compete effectively with the regional newcomers.

The rise of pan-Arab broadcasting was accompanied by the rise of public expectations. News consumers found that the satellite dishes dotting almost every Arab city’s skyline could bring them vast amounts of information. Their worldviews were changing, and by the time the Arab uprisings of 2011 began, their appetites for media content of various kinds had expanded enormously. Those appetites were also becoming more sophisticated, with audiences differentiating between state-run and independent offerings, and the preference for the latter becoming more pronounced. Al Jazeera was not exempt from this, as it found that it was perceived by some as being merely a voice for Qatari foreign policy – policy that was seen by some as not adequately supportive of the uprisings in certain countries or too inflammatory in reporting events in other nations.

Media and politics have always been inseparable, and a case can be made that as more media venues become available to the public, that relationship becomes more complex. More facets of characteristics such as “Arabness” become apparent, and those conducting public diplomacy must recognize that reaching publics is becoming ever more complicated.



## Credibility and Public Diplomacy

Should information disseminated as a part of public diplomacy be considered by its recipients to be believable and useful, or should it be dismissed as mere propaganda? That question persists, and how it is answered does much to determine public diplomacy's value. The answer reflects various principles of public diplomacy:

- A country's public diplomacy is only as effective as the policies behind it. When President Barack Obama visited Cairo in 2009, he delivered a beautifully written speech that promised, among other things, assistance to the Palestinian people. Obama said, "So let there be no doubt: The situation for the Palestinian people is intolerable. And America will not turn our backs on the legitimate Palestinian aspiration for dignity, opportunity, and a state of their own."<sup>5</sup> That won applause in the Arab world, but it lasted only briefly because the United States was not perceived as following up with substantive policies to assist the Palestinians.
- Perceived lack of "foreignness" is an asset, enhancing credibility. In 2011, when Muammar Qaddafi tried to blame Al Qaeda, Israel, and other outsiders for the rebellion within Libya, Libyans had access to Arab news sources that they trusted. As a result, wrote Shibley Telhami, Qaddafi's "narrative was simply dismissed."<sup>6</sup> Just as Al Jazeera and other Arab news channels are more credible to many viewers than are channels from outside the region, so too are other forms of public diplomacy. (A historical example of this phenomenon can be seen in the British government's "public diplomacy by proxy" efforts in 1940, when emphasis was placed on influencing American journalists' content rather than relying solely on the BBC and other British media to sway Americans' attitudes about assisting Britain in its war against Germany. American voices were judged to be more effective than British ones in puncturing America's isolationist bubble.)<sup>7</sup> As new regional, national, and local media proliferate, the ability of outsiders to compete effectively diminishes sharply.

- Use of social media and other Internet-based communication, as well as pervasive mobile telephony, redefines “communities of interest” in terms of affinity and credibility. Given the breadth of Internet-based content, individuals can match their own specific interests with those of others as reflected by Facebook page content, Twitter feeds, YouTube imagery, and such. So many easily accessible venues for indigenous content now exist that it has become more difficult for foreign governments and other parties interested in conducting public diplomacy to compete for attention and to make the case for their own credibility.

Taken together, all these factors create a universe of intellectual complexity in which information consumers have wider choice and greater autonomy. By comparison, a half-century ago, during the Cold War, when Eastern Europeans decided what information was credible, their choices were simpler: Radio Moscow and its brethren, or the Voice of America, BBC, and similar non-communist dispensers of information. When the United States government, for example, wanted to conduct public diplomacy directed to the publics of communist-bloc countries, competition was scarce. If indigenous sources were available, their reach was limited and their longevity precarious.

Today, with indigenous sources plentiful, accessible, and credible in the Middle East, the public diplomacy environment is much different. Just getting the public’s attention is an intensely competitive process. As will be discussed below, this does not apply solely to outside voices, but also to those emanating from within the Arab world. In terms of democratic theory, all this is to the good – a great array of freely expressed voices that stimulate open political discourse.

Within this array is a broad range of political perspectives and predispositions that affect the impact of public diplomacy. Shahira Fahmy, Wayne Wanta, and Erik C. Nisbet found that within the Arab world, U.S. public diplomacy is most successful not at winning converts from among those who are strongly anti-American,

but rather at reinforcing opinions that are already to some degree sympathetic to U.S. policy.<sup>8</sup> These authors cite viewership of the U.S. government-sponsored Arabic-language news channel Al Hurra, which they found was viewed more often than the Arab channels Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya by those who “generally supported U.S. policy.”<sup>9</sup>

Politicized viewing choices are not surprising, particularly during times of political upheaval and when new alignments are taking shape. They do, however, underscore the difficulties facing those who want to reach the “unconverted” in terms of opinion toward the countries conducting public diplomacy. In the case cited above, although Al Hurra apparently had success in reaching a relatively pro-American audience, news coverage by the dominant channels in the region—Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya—sometimes enhanced anti-American sentiment. It should be noted that these two channels’ effects are grounded in religious as well as political outlook, and their influence on their audiences is related to this, at least to some extent.

In their study of the push-and-pull of these channels’ coverage, Erik C. Nisbet and Teresa A. Meyers found that increased exposure to Al Jazeera among Arab nationalists “moved the predicted level of anti-American sentiment from being similar to state-centric nationalists to being similar to Islamic nationalists. The opposite is true of Al Arabiya: increased exposure moved Arab nationalists from being similar to Islamic nationalists to being similar to state-centric nationalist political identifiers.”<sup>10</sup> Further, reported the authors, “those for whom an Islamic national identity is most salient are more likely to hold an unfavorable opinion of the United States than those who have an Arab nationalist, state-centric, or mixed identity schema.”<sup>11</sup>

Most Western countries tend to keep away from religious slants in their public diplomacy, which can prove counterproductive in the Muslim world and among other publics for whom the connection between religion and politics is significant. In the Arab world,

religious sensitivities of Muslim and non-Muslim populations will presumably affect, to varying degrees, attitudes toward the governments engaging in public diplomacy. Those governments must craft public diplomacy efforts that recognize religion-related identity issues.

A survey conducted in 2013 by Cairo University found that 70 percent of Egyptians watch religious satellite television channels frequently and 30 percent watch them sometimes. The programs' content is sometimes overtly political and is considered extremist by many. That led to Al Azhar, Egypt's leading center of Islamic learning, to begin its own channel to "promote moderate teachings and tolerance," according to Grand Imam Ahmad Al Tayyeb.<sup>12</sup>

The importance of religion leads to another issue that should be considered by public diplomacy policy makers: the extent to which public diplomacy efforts coming directly from the government might be less credible and effective than those created within the private sector. For instance, academic exchanges directed exclusively by universities, even if at the behest of government, might meet with less suspicion than purely governmental efforts to wield influence. To a considerable degree, credibility depends on the eye of the beholder, but as a general proposition an exchange program organized by Harvard University or a film production workshop directed by Disney might have a better chance of being accepted by a public that is suspicious of U.S. government intentions.

This concept is also germane when considering news media as public diplomacy vehicles. In terms of U.S. public diplomacy, policy makers might find value in determining if Al Hurra—clearly a product of the American government—is less credible than CNN or other non-governmental broadcasters. If so, could the vast amount of money spent on Al Hurra (by mid-2013, approaching US\$1 billion) be better spent elsewhere, perhaps by directing Arabic-subtitled versions of commercial/non-governmental American newscasts to the Arab world? Would intensified efforts to use social media be another more efficient strategy? This is a particularly important issue

given how far Al Hurra trails Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya in Facebook “likes” and retweets, and the lack of engagement opportunities on Al Hurra’s website.<sup>13</sup>

Such are the matters policy makers must ponder as they grapple with ways to enhance the credibility of public diplomacy.

### **Entering the Post-Al Jazeera Era**

Al Jazeera is less than two decades old, but an argument can be made that in terms of its role in the Arab communications world its importance is in decline. (This refers only to the Arabic channel, not the Al Jazeera channels broadcasting in other languages.) Its supremacy as the leading regional broadcaster has been assertively contested by Al Arabiya, the all-news channel of Saudi-backed Middle East Broadcasting Corporation (MBC). It also has polemical competitors such as Hezbollah’s Al Manar. But Al Jazeera and the other regional channels are finding that the main threat to their influence is coming from one of the by-products of the 2011 uprisings: newborn localized media.

During the days when Ben Ali, Mubarak, Qaddafi, and others of their ilk were unchallenged, their regimes controlled news media in their countries, making certain that content adhered to government doctrine. With the forced departure of these despots, restraints on media were relaxed, at least partially. An array of new newspapers and broadcasters popped up, some without the requisite journalistic or financial skills to last very long, but some possessed the tenacity to broaden the boundaries of media within their countries. This increase in the number of media venues ensured availability of diversified information sources in terms of their views of political and social issues.

This can alter the environment in which public diplomacy is conducted. If, for instance, a new local television channel emphasizes women’s rights, public diplomacy efforts related to that topic might more easily find a constituency. On the other hand, if a new channel espouses Salafist doctrine, public diplomacy efforts related to

democratic liberalization might encounter a new obstacle and tactics must be designed in response. The point is that the political terrain in much of the post-uprisings Arab world has undergone a tectonic shift for a variety of reasons, including the proliferation of locally-oriented media with exceptionally diverse outlooks.

Over the years within the Arab states, Lebanon has had the most open media environment and most sophisticated media governance system. A 1994 Lebanese statute revoked the state's broadcasting monopoly and facilitated private ownership of broadcast stations—a precursor of liberalization yet to come.<sup>14</sup> More recently, Lebanon Broadcasting Corporation International (LBCI), Future TV, Al Manar, and other Lebanese channels have reflected the numerous political and religious facets of that country's life.<sup>15</sup>

Lebanon's media environment also reflects the country's political tensions. When the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation went on the air in 1985, in the midst of a civil war, the company's headquarters was periodically shelled and at one point in 1992 the channel had a single day to move all its people and equipment out of its offices before government troops took over the building. They loaded their gear into 50 trucks, set up a makeshift studio, and got their evening newscast on the air. After the fighting ended (for a while), LBC launched its free satellite channel in 1996, providing Arabic entertainment programs aimed primarily at the 15-24 age group. It followed this with three additional channels to reach the global Arab diaspora: LBC Europe, LBC America, and LBC Australia. In 2006, recognizing variations in the interests of Arabs living in the Middle East and North Africa, LBC began LBC Maghreb, which promised localized content with "Lebanese flair."<sup>16</sup> Taken together, the television offerings from Lebanon illustrate how a small country (population about four million) can establish a regional, and to a lesser degree global, presence through mass media. The ability of television to stir *domestic* political passions is also seen in the effects of Al Manar, among others.<sup>17</sup>

Although it can be placed near a far end of the ideological spectrum, Al Manar is an interesting example of the political-journalistic dynamics of contemporary Arab television and of non-state political media, a category that is expanding as political organizations try to elevate themselves to the de facto legitimacy that having their own media outlets purportedly provides. In addition to its impact within Lebanon, Al Manar is seen by some as having considerable influence among Muslim communities around the world. In late 2004, French officials ordered the cable provider Eutelsat to stop carrying Al Manar because of the channel's overtly anti-Semitic content, which was allegedly fostering increased radicalization and isolation among French Muslims.<sup>18</sup>

Regardless of international approbation, Al Manar gives Hezbollah valuable access to publics within the region (and beyond). In terms of audience size, Al Manar does not rival Al Jazeera or Al Arabiya, but it allows Hassan Nasrallah and other Hezbollah leaders to have a political pulpit that they may use whenever they choose. This venue is not, however, insulated from external political dynamics. Hezbollah's support of Bashar al-Assad during the Syrian rebellion that began in 2011 cost the organization many of its supporters in the Arab world. Al Manar could not change that; politics trumps television.

But Al Manar has remained strong enough to continue as a significant media player in the region. For those who thought Al Jazeera was doing a poor job of covering events in Bahrain due to the Qatari leadership's sympathy for the Sunni monarchy there, Al Manar filled the gap with coverage more attuned to the views of Bahrain's Shiite protestors. (BBC Arabic TV also provided more extensive coverage of Bahrain than did Al Jazeera.)<sup>19</sup>

By the time of the "Arab spring," the region was increasingly ripe for changes in media habits. In urban areas, television reigned supreme, as was evidenced by the forest of satellite dishes stretching across the skylines of major cities. Radio was also widely relied upon, especially in rural areas where television was less available.

Among traditional media, the biggest changes were fueled by politics, not technology. As government control of broadcasting receded, independent ventures took root. New television stations began to pop up, with content designed to match local tastes. Political transformations were taking place and people wanted to know how they would be affected, not in the grand regional sense that Al Jazeera could tell them about, but rather in terms of local services and opportunities.

In Egypt, with the fall of the Mubarak regime, 16 low-budget television channels quickly opened, one of which was Cairo-based January 25 TV. This channel offered shows such as “Hashtag,” which collected news from Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to broadcast to the large audience that had television but not Internet at home. These channels reflected the new spirit of intellectual independence among journalists. One of January 25 TV’s reporters said of their programming, “We’re broadcasting what Egyptians need to hear, not what the state wants us to say.”<sup>20</sup>

For those conducting public diplomacy, these venues present new opportunities to reach publics that can be more precisely targeted than those who watch regional channels. By way of comparison, consider how American political campaigns shape their advertising tactics to align with content of cable television channels. Audience research can tell them who watches which channels in terms of age, gender, income, and other factors. This allows a sophisticated campaign to deliver audience-appropriate advertising messages, channel by channel. (The 2012 Obama campaign was particularly adept at this, targeting women voters with ads on the Food Channel and Lifetime and aiming at men watching ESPN. On specific issues, Obama ads touting his efforts to block tire imports from China were run on cable channels most popular in zip code areas near Ohio’s tire-manufacturing factories.)<sup>21</sup> The array of localized Arab channels offers similar possibilities: messages related to job training for younger adults; messages about women’s issues for channels/programs with substantial female audiences; and so on. The basic rule for this process will be this: as the audience becomes more



identifiably segmented, so too must public diplomacy messaging become more precisely targeted. In some countries, time will pass before audience research is precise enough to allow this to work optimally, but the potential is there and public diplomacy must reshape itself accordingly.

Refining messages and using social media better are also tasks for those who manage public diplomacy projects that serve specific counterterrorism purposes. For instance, efforts by the United States to send messages about Al Qaeda-related groups in Syria such as Jabhat al-Nusra have been found most effective when they “go negative,” showing that the group is the worst alternative because it kills other Muslims.

On a larger scale, one sign of the shift to increased numbers of significant local television channels has been the arrival of MBC Egypt, a new channel offered by the giant Middle East Broadcasting Company, parent of the news channel Al Arabiya. The Egyptian channel, which went on the air in November 2012, is entertainment-rather than news-oriented, but offers a talk show to discuss Egyptian women’s issues and religious programming.<sup>22</sup> This channel is significant in that MBC had been best known for its pan-Arab offerings such as Al Arabiya, which is Al Jazeera’s principal rival in this category. Meanwhile, Al Jazeera established its own local news-oriented channel in Cairo, Al Jazeera Mubasher Misr, which has been considered sympathetic to the Muslim Brotherhood.

If these local channels prove successful, they are likely to be further copied by other regional interests. It is also worth noting that Al Hurra, the U.S. government’s Arabic-language news channel, has been most successful in terms of winning audience with its separate Iraq stream, which has localized content and is terrestrially distributed, so a satellite dish is not necessary.

If major broadcast organizations decide to embrace the local channel model, they will need to allocate significant resources to the task. Regional news production emanates from a central newsroom

plus numerous bureaus; local channels will each require their own reporting and production facilities that are far more expensive to operate than is an individual news bureau.

Although satellite television was the most significant tool for disseminating information during the 2011 uprisings, television per se is not nearly as dominant as it once was. Twenty years ago, evaluating the broadcast industry would have been sufficient as the way to define prospects for public diplomacy media-based efforts. Today, new arrays of technologically advanced but personalized media are reshaping the environment in which public diplomacy must try to reach citizens around the world.

### **Social Media**

Online media have increasingly become accessible in individual Arab households as well as in Internet cafes and other community venues. Even more pervasive is the mobile/cell telephone—not so much the sophisticated “smartphones” popular in more developed countries, but rather the more basic communication tools that allow the voice and texting connectivity on which new social and political linkages can be built.

This is in line with a global trend that reflects nearly universal mobile phone use: by early 2013, there were 6.8 billion mobile phone subscribers among the world’s population of 7.1 billion people.<sup>23</sup> Meanwhile, Internet access keeps increasing. By mid-2012 in Egypt, 36 percent of the population had access; Libya, 17 percent; Tunisia, 39 percent; Syria, 23 percent. (The region’s highest rate was in Qatar, 86 percent.)<sup>24</sup> Compared with some other countries, these numbers might not be impressive, but the growth rate is significant. In Libya, for example, just a year earlier, a mere 5 percent of the population could access the Internet.<sup>25</sup> Shibley Telhami found in 2011 that a quarter of all Arab Internet users said they had acquired access within the past year. Telhami also reported an indicator of Arab social media use fitting into global patterns: during the week in February 2011 just before Hosni Mubarak resigned, Tweets from

within Egypt and elsewhere that addressed political change in that country rose from 2,300 a day to 230,000 a day. The top 23 videos about Egyptian protests received nearly 5.5 million online views.<sup>26</sup>

As these numbers climb, expectations about information change. With new tools available, people not only want more information, they also want to participate in gathering and disseminating it. Further, they want to be able to respond to it. “Interactivity” means something, particularly to those who for so long were parts of a passive “audience” that was fed bland, filtered “news” shaped by governments interested in providing information only as a tool to help them retain power.

This new empowerment underscores the importance of one of the principal tenets of public diplomacy: *listening* is crucial. As was made clear during the events of 2011, the one-time audience has found its voice and it can be heard through Tweets, Facebook posts, YouTube videos, and their many high-tech kin. Among those using these tools are Islamic televangelists; by late in 2011, Amr Khaled had 3.45 million Facebook “likes” and Ahmad al-Shugairi had 307,000 Twitter followers.<sup>27</sup> Related to the preachers’ embrace of social media is the widespread use by smartphone owners of religion-related apps such as these: Ramadan Times, a location-aware app that provides a precise countdown to the end of the daily fast; a mapping app showing the nearest mosques; text and audio versions of the Qur’an in numerous languages; and Qur’anic verses as ringtones.<sup>28</sup> Conservative Muslims might contend that some of these have damaged faith through gimmickry, but there certainly is an audience, particularly among the young, for such tools.

More generally, Arab social media use is leading to social networking. According to a Pew Research Center survey:

- In Egypt and Tunisia, more than 6 in 10 social media users share their political views online compared to a 20-country median of 34 percent.

- In Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon, and Jordan, more than 7 in 10 share their views of community issues, compared to a 20-country median of 46 percent.
- There is a large educational gap in social media users with far more having a college degree. This is highest in Egypt where 81 percent of those with a college degree use social networking sites, contrasted with 18 percent of those without one.
- Social network users in Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan are more likely to post about religion (63, 63, and 62 percent respectively).
- Among Egyptian smart phone users, 79 percent access social networking sites via their phones, though for Egypt, Turkey, and elsewhere this is also dependent on education level.<sup>29</sup>

Such data are merely pieces of a large puzzle and have limited value individually. They provide, however, the beginnings of the portrait of a new Arab public sphere that public diplomats must study carefully.

### **Prospects for Public Diplomacy**

For non-Muslim states wishing to conduct public diplomacy in the Arab world, prospects are daunting. The region's media environment is healthy and growing, and with so many voices trying to be heard, outsiders will find it challenging to deliver messages that gain the attention of a sizable audience. Although not quantifiable, as the indigenous information flow becomes stronger, political self-sufficiency increases and reliance on news or other content from "outsiders" diminishes.

The public discourse that is enhanced by a media-rich public sphere is more sophisticated than that found in a more controlled environment, such as was found in most of the pre-2011 Arab world. Barack Obama's experience with the region reflects this. Telhami noted that "for Arabs, it is *always* about the issues," adding that "the unmistakably different tone with which Obama approached both

Arabs and Muslims made no difference in Arabs' views of American policy. It was only after Obama began winding down the [Iraq] war in 2011 that Arabs began to see the United States in a slightly more favorable light."<sup>30</sup>

"Values" are not the issue; policies are. Telhami's research found that Arabs tend to admire freedom and democracy but they question "whether America stands for what it professes." He explained: "From Woodrow Wilson's time, America has championed self-determination, and that has found resonance in the Arab world. But how does that square with America's seeming acceptance of Palestinians living under occupation? America champions freedom and democracy, but how does one reconcile that with U.S. support for Arab autocrats who repress their people?" He added that such questions fostered cynicism about U.S. democracy promotion efforts—they were considered "a fig leaf for wars designed to control oil and help Israel."<sup>31</sup>

Given the unsettled history of the Arab world during the past hundred years, there is little that is surprising in this distrust of outsiders (the more powerful the outsider, the greater the distrust). The one non-Arab state that as of 2012 was widely admired by Arabs was Turkey, in large part because of the Islamic character of its democracy.<sup>32</sup> This is not surprising to anyone who understands the importance of religion in the Arab world. Muslim countries (and often their leaders) will be emulated before non-Muslim ones.

Even if one does not accept the "clash of civilizations" theory, the realities of religious differences should be acknowledged. Successful public diplomacy directed toward the Arab world should be firmly grounded in recognition that Islam is a dominant factor in the daily life of several hundred million people and in the public life of Arab countries. The concept of church-state separation, which is so important in America's constitutional system and in the structure of other Western governments, is unacceptable to many Muslims, and that must be recognized by non-Muslim states wanting to engage with the Arab world. Although Lebanon and Egypt have substantial

Christian populations, the key to reaching the majority of the Arab public is Islam. Public diplomats should be knowledgeable about the Qur'an and tenets of Islamic faith and they should understand how Islam is interwoven with many Muslims' worldview.

In May 2013, Barack Obama gave a speech at the U.S. National Defense University to redefine the American struggle against terrorism. A part of this speech that did not attract much attention was the President's comment that some extremists believe "that Islam is in conflict with the United States and the West, and that violence against Western targets, including civilians, is justified in pursuit of a larger cause." The President rightly asserted that "this ideology is based on a lie."<sup>33</sup> The lie, however, has taken on a life of its own and must be debunked. As long as non-Muslim countries are perceived as being hostile, on religious grounds, toward their Muslim counterparts, public diplomacy will have little chance to gain traction, regardless of the new media environment.

Along with religion, the changing role of women in the Arab world will have profound effect on media development and public diplomacy. This will develop at several levels. The most visible of these will be very much in a spotlight, such as when Yemeni Tawakkol Karman won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011 for her "Arab Spring" activism. Less visible, but arguably more important is the gradual but steady increase in women's involvement in the region's evolution.

The path is not easy. The brutal harassment of women in Cairo's Tahrir Square, purportedly the birthplace of new Arab freedoms, underscores the misogyny found in much of the Middle East, despite the record of respect for women in early Muslim culture. But women have been persistent in their commitment to change. To again cite Yemen, 60 Yemeni women came together in July of 2011 to learn the intricacies of organizing, funding, and publicizing political campaigns. In the West, such gatherings are so common that they attract little attention. In Yemen, it was extraordinary, turning upside-down the broadly accepted belief that women

have no business involving themselves in public life. One of the organizers of the workshop, *Yemen Times* editor Nadia Al-Sakkaf, wrote, “It was amazing how the women, although they were from different political backgrounds and geographical locations, got together, fought, argued, agreed and moved ahead, so much unlike our Yemeni men who seem not to find in their heart the will or the ability to compromise.”<sup>34</sup>

Beyond workshops, Arab women have been using cyberspace to articulate and advance their interests. Rita Stephan wrote that Arab women use their access to the virtual world to create “alternative discursive spaces where it is possible to redefine patriarchal gender roles while questioning the sociocultural, economic, political, and legal institutions constraining them.” Stephan also noted, however, that Arab women’s access to cyberspace is limited by “the high female illiteracy rate and by their unfamiliarity with foreign languages (mostly English) in which most of the information on the web is available.”<sup>35</sup>

For the past decade, Arab women have become more recognized as an identifiable media audience and a prospective source of political clout. Dina Matar reported that Lebanese broadcaster *Heya* (Arabic for “She”), which began operation in 2002, “was the first pan-Arab station...to specifically target Arab women audiences.”<sup>36</sup>

Public diplomacy directed toward the Arab world has begun to more assertively incorporate women’s issues. When Hillary Rodham Clinton was the U.S. Secretary of State, she moved women’s rights to the top category of American foreign policy priorities. During a 2010 visit to Saudi Arabia, Clinton said, “I, of course, believe that educating young women is not only morally right, but it is also the most important investment any society can make in order to further and advance the values and the interests of the people. The Egyptian poet Hafez Ibrahim said, ‘A mother is a school. Empower her and you empower a great nation.’”<sup>37</sup>

Tara Sonenshine, U.S. Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, addressed the role of Arab women

in a 2013 speech in Washington. She asked, “Should we really care about increasing the role of women in the Arab world—beyond just feeling good about ourselves? If so, why should we? Will the full inclusion of women—practically speaking, politically speaking, economically speaking, make a difference amid this uncertain, even chaotic transition? And how will we know what success looks like?... According to a World Bank study, women in the Arab world have the lowest rates of employment of any region. The economies of the Middle East will never reach their potential without women playing a significantly more active role in the work force. But let’s go beyond economics. Women are frequently the ones most intimately connected in their communities and with their families—and thus uniquely positioned to prevent extremist ideology creeping in. They are the community’s most frequent teachers of respect and tolerance. But they can also bring their attributes to more than so-called ‘women’s issues,’ including conflict resolution, economic policy, and political leadership... There is an inherent conundrum here: Women are needed in decision making circles to bring about political change. But, until there is change, women will have difficulty in attaining influential political positions. I am building for you a solid case. The evidence couldn’t be more clear-cut: Women are the bellwether, the barometer and the building bricks of greater economies, democracies and countries. So, yes, we should care—because when we stop talking about women in the Arab World, governments and economies backslide. Women are sidelined. And there is a retreat. With retreat come failed expectations, violence, and suppression of rights—everyone’s rights. The cost of this systemic discrimination—and failure to harness women’s contributions—has consequences for prosperity, stability and even violent extremism.”<sup>38</sup>

### **The Public Diplomacy Mandate**

Clinton and Sonenshine presented fundamental arguments in support of public diplomacy that are pertinent not just for women but for all in the Arab world. The newly opened media environment in the region lends itself to communicating public diplomacy messaging, directly and indirectly. Clinton’s travels in the Middle East were



particularly important because her message was perceived as coming from the highest levels of the American government. Assuming that Barack Obama's second administration and the governments of other nations that value public diplomacy can develop coherent policy to back up their outreach, the incremental advantages accrued by public diplomacy may be within reach.

Such policy initiatives today have the advantage of being able to use unprecedented media penetration into the audiences that the policy makers want to reach. By developing a comprehensive media strategy that takes full advantage of new technologies and tools such as social media, proponents of public diplomacy may finally be able to shape constructive and supportive policies toward the Arab world.

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