

Nov 04, 2016 by **Mark Dillen**

# **The Public Diplomat** <sup>[1]</sup>

You might think Barack Hussein Obama would choose a safer audience than the Arab world for his first TV interview as President. But he chose Dubai-based Al Arabiya, and he chose well.

With all the innumerable problems facing the United States, the most daunting long-term problem is America's relationship to the world; within that context, our complicated and troubled relations with the Arab, Muslim and Middle Eastern nations are the most urgent to address.

By initial indications, the ten-minute interview was a big success. In the words of the experienced journalist who conducted the interview, Hisham Melham, it impressed the viewers of Al-Arabiya with its tone:

That was really the message: it was in the tone...I think he was trying to undermine those who were trying to demonize the United States and demonize him personally, and I think he succeeded when he spoke in a humane voice telling them "members of my family also belong to the Muslim faith"... and I think he [will] disarm a lot of people... [When] he spoke about the humanity of both sides (Israeli and Palestinian)... the average viewers felt that there was an authenticity in his voice, there was a different tone, there was a yearning for a new page...

Melham also spoke with CNN's Wolf Blitzer, describing "the good vibe" that the interview has already sent throughout the Arab world.

Some might say this was President Barack Obama's first foray into public diplomacy as president. If so, he certainly was a consummate public diplomat. It's worth noting that, having decided to reach out to the Arab public, the Obama White House had choices. They could have used a U.S.-government owned broadcaster such as Alhurra, with scant audience and limited credibility, or the freight-laden Al Jazeera, tainted in Western eyes by its popularity as a medium used by al Qaeda. They chose wisely Al Arabiya, whose satellite signal made it available throughout the Arab world. There is no doubt that this effort to reach out to the publics of the Arab-speaking world already appears to have been more successful than any other official act of U.S. public diplomacy in this region in recent memory.

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