

Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

Talking about Public Diplomacy In The Middle East ^[1]

CAIRO --- I've spent the past week in Syria, Qatar, and Egypt, primarily to proselytize about public diplomacy. In Syria, in a Damascus University lecture (carried by Al Jazeera Live) and a lengthy interview on Syrian National Television, I made the case that Arab states do an exceptionally poor job of conducting public diplomacy and that their standing in the global political community suffers as a result. I made the same point in Qatar and Egypt, and in all three places I encountered little disagreement, even when I added that the only country in the region to do a decent job of public diplomacy is Israel.

As evidenced by questions from university students and others, there remains much puzzlement about the meaning and value of public diplomacy. A query from one student illustrated this: "If we have diplomatic relations with most of the countries in the world, how can you say that we have weak public diplomacy?"

Clearly, public diplomacy's proponents have work to do to define the field and build a constituency. But some in the region, particularly directors of research centers and other scholars, recognize that public diplomacy could be a valuable tool in efforts to win greater political respect for the Arab world. I found considerable interest in developing research projects that might influence policy and foster collaboration with public diplomacy practitioners and scholars from outside the region.

Considering how the Arab world has often done damage to itself by embracing insularity, even these first stirrings of an appreciation of public diplomacy are encouraging. If appropriate initiatives are undertaken and partnerships developed, public diplomacy might begin to gain traction here.
