

Nov 04, 2016 by **Philip Seib**

U.S. Public Diplomacy Sputtering in Muslim World ^[1]

DOHA, QATAR --- In the beginning, there was The Speech.

After that, there was the letdown.

The Speech was Barack Obama's address at Cairo University in June 2009 that seemed to promise a new era in relations between the United States and the Muslim world. People in the Arab states and other Islamic nations took heart from the words of an American president who seemed to truly understand Islam and appreciate the aspirations of Muslims. Those Americans involved in the practice of public diplomacy became hopeful that they could do their jobs free from the suspicion and ridicule that they had endured during the Bush years.

But at the U.S. Islamic World Forum here in Doha (organized by the Brookings Institution and the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs), it has been clear that the Obama magic has lost its pizzazz. The rhetoric about the United States might not be as angry as it was during George W. Bush's presidency, but there is ample bitterness derived from hope turned sour. Among the comments from forum participants were these: "America is biased against the Arabs"; "If America were fighting oppression, there would be no dispute"; "It is foggy vision through which the United States looks at the Arab world."

At the heart of this are two issues. First, of course, is Palestine-Israel. Arabs simply do not believe that the United States is doing all it can to push Israel toward an acceptable deal that would establish a Palestinian state and settle related problems. During her appearance at the forum, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton lamented Israel's refusal to respond to U.S. calls for stepped-up relief efforts for Palestinians in Gaza. To a Western audience, she may have sounded convincing. The Arabs here were not buying it.

The second issue is Iran. U.S. complaints about Iran's nuclear program meet resistance here. People in this region need to live with Iran, which looms just across the Persian Gulf from these states. So when Secretary Clinton called on Gulf leaders to pressure Iran, Qatar's prime minister said America should talk directly to the Iranians, stating that "holding a dialogue with Iran through messengers is not advisable."

This forum was premised on good will, but considerable tension surfaced throughout the three days of meetings. That tension – not the exuberance immediately after The Speech – shapes the context in which American public diplomacy in the Muslim world must now proceed.
