

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

New Public Diplomacy for the New Arab World ^[1]

DOHA --- My conversation with two North African friends ranged widely, from the role of satellite television in the Arab world to the prospects for electoral reform in the region. Then we came to how other nations would deal with the new dynamics of Arab politics. One of my friends said, "In the past, diplomacy has been with the leaders, but now it must be with the people."

In other words, public diplomacy will now be of unprecedented importance for governments, such as that of the United States, that want to develop constructive relationships with what are in many ways new nations. Not since the crumbling of European communism in 1989 have we seen such a significant transformation of the character of so many states.

The development of new politics in the Arab world requires an equally sweeping redesign of U.S. public diplomacy. To a great extent, America's public diplomacy, like that of many other nations, has drifted farther and farther into self-promoting "branding" that will win over only the most gullible. Such an audience is unlikely to be found among Arabs who are deeply suspicious of the patrons of recently ousted dictators.

Also, Western policymakers' fascination with social media has gone too far. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and such are useful, but only in limited ways. Their constituency is too small and their content too superficial to be heavily relied upon in building and maintaining global friendships.

The new dynamics of the Arab world require a meaningful shift in public diplomacy strategy, with less emphasis on advertising and more on service. As has been the case with most political upheaval throughout history, economic inequities were at the root of public anger in Arab states. This injustice finally became so onerous that Arabs' long-enduring stoicism gave way to revolutionary fervor, and even the most cold-blooded defenders of the status quo, such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, were overwhelmed.

Many years will pass and much pain will be endured before fair economic systems take hold in the new Arab states, but this work should begin immediately. A principal goal of U.S. public diplomacy should be to assist in this process by placing much greater emphasis on a public diplomacy that provides help to education, job creation, entrepreneurship, and other programs that can directly improve the lives of the tens of millions of young people who will shape the region's future.

For the United States, this will require closer collaboration between public diplomats and USAID, which in turn must be supported by a Congress willing to undertake a more realistic appraisal of America's role in the world. At the moment, Congress seems intent on reducing the State Department's budget to the level of that of a third-rate power, leaving the Arab world

open to courtship by shrewder players, such as Iran.

This is an excellent opportunity for President Barack Obama, the world's most skillful public diplomat, to put some substance behind his administration's noble rhetoric. A comprehensive public diplomacy initiative that recognizes the complex new political dynamics of the Arab world and supports economic justice rather than trying to promote "America the lovable," might win some valuable new friends.
