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The Arab Spring Casts Obama as United States Public Diplomacy Messenger ^[1]

What should President Barack Obama do next as a U.S. public diplomacy measure vis-à-vis the Arab world? As the regime in Libya crumbles to the cheers of Arab citizens across the region, the Syrian regime is still clinging to power, and even lending a voice to Libya's fallen leader Muammar Qaddafi, who has been broadcasting defiant messages on a private pan-Arab satellite channel called Al-Oroba, which now shares its broadcasts with Syrian-based pro-regime channel Al-Rai. This symbolic partnership between Syria's Bashar al-Assad and Qaddafi is the latest parallel between two leaders who have been engaging in violence against their own people.


Although President Obama, along with leaders of European countries, has called for Bashar al-Assad to cede power, this call has not yet been coupled with a strong foreign policy measure. The Syrian opposition still lags behind the Libyan rebels in terms of achieving international political recognition. It is undeniable that the international community's acceptance of the Libyan National Transitional Council as the legitimate representative of the Libyan people has greatly aided the rebels; such recognition paves the way for political lobbying and the kind of international support that opposition movements need as they strive to fend off violent regime crackdowns. It is crucial to support the Syrian opposition to develop along the same path.

Why is it that Obama has become the United States' public diplomacy messenger at this critical time? The election of Barack Obama in November 2008 had marked a change in perceptions of U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East, as it came to be defined by the persona of Obama himself. Barack Obama's taking over the presidency after the Bush period was received with a mixture of optimism and caution in the Arab world. The first reaction was because he is the United States' first black president, a Democrat with the middle name Hussein, a worldly man with roots in Africa and Indonesia, the largest Muslim country, and therefore inspired hope for a change of direction in U.S. policy and actions. The second reaction was because people across the Arab world considered Obama to deliver the right rhetoric—especially his historic speech in Cairo in June 2009—yet wanted to see his words coupled with action; in other words, to see concrete change in U.S. foreign policy towards the region. Obama, being an 'extraordinary' president (black, with Muslim heritage, delivering congratulatory Ramadan and Norouz messages to Middle Eastern people on YouTube), became a public diplomacy message and medium for the United States in the region. But polls showed that Obama's popularity in the Arab world eventually started to decline as people in the region did not see the concrete change in foreign policy they had hoped for during his presidency, especially on the Israeli-Palestinian front.

The Arab Spring has presented a new challenge for U.S. public diplomacy. During this period, the United States has largely regressed to relying on words, not actions, in reaching out to the Arab people. The United States has not changed the structure of its public diplomacy

programs targeting the region. Al-Hurra has kept broadcasting, though it has now been almost completely eclipsed by al-Jazeera's dedication to covering the Arab revolutions, while U.S. cultural and educational public diplomacy programs continue virtually unchanged. The Arab Spring could have been an occasion for the United States to rejuvenate its public diplomacy activities towards the Arab world. Yet, with no change in public diplomacy strategy or programs, the majority of American public diplomacy messages became the policy statements delivered through the State Department and the White House, as well as speeches by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and President Barack Obama. Obama's iconic status meant that he has been cast in the role of primary U.S. public diplomacy messenger.

Yet, those statements and speeches were, in the eyes of protesters in Tunisia and Egypt, always two steps behind the sentiment in the Arab street. Nobody can forget that the United States initially took a cautious line with Tunisia, with Clinton declaring on 12 January 2011 that the U.S. government was not 'taking sides' in the clashes between the protesters and the Tunisian government. The United States followed a similar line with Egypt, standing by Mubarak in the early days of the Egyptian revolution, and often sending conflicting messages. In February, the U.S. envoy to Egypt announced to the media that he thought Mubarak should stay, while the White House had announced the opposite. Thus, instead of presenting a credible image, the United States ended up engaging in cognitive dissonance. It did not help that the tear gas bombs that the Egyptian police used to disperse the protesters in Tahrir Square were 'Made in USA'. Photos of angry protesters holding the empty tear gas canisters displaying those words were transmitted by the media worldwide. The United States appeared to be saying one thing—or several—and doing another.

The United States took a different line with Libya, backing a UN Security Council Resolution that called for military intervention by NATO. It later also announced an aid package to Tunisia and Egypt. President Obama gave a speech on 19 May 2011 in which he emphasized the United States' support for reform in the Middle East. Yet, once again, policy failed to catch up with Arab public sentiment. Zogby International's Arab Attitudes 2011 poll, released in July 2011, announced: 'While many Arabs were hopeful that the election of Barack Obama would improve U.S.-Arab relations, that hope has evaporated. Today, President Obama's favorable ratings across the Arab World are 10% or less. Obama's performance ratings are lowest on the two issues to which he has devoted the most energy: Palestine and engagement with the Muslim world .

Perhaps the most important reasons behind this decline in perceiving U.S. engagement positively are that, first, following the public movements for democracy in the Arab world, U.S. public diplomacy towards the region has started to face a new, unexpected challenge: the perceived dormant Arab audience lacking in political agency that this public diplomacy was initially crafted to address through initiatives like (al-Hurra) is no longer there. Engaging the Arab world demands a new set of parameters that the United States has yet to catch up with. Second, there is a need for a dynamic relationship between public diplomacy and changing political contexts. Despite Obama's rhetoric on Libya, and now Syria, those efforts have been marred by the perception of the United States as a lukewarm supporter of Arab democracy, as U.S. public diplomacy has not adapted quickly enough to the changing political context in the region.

The U.S. stance towards Libya is one case of words and actions matching, yet the United States cannot get too comfortable congratulating itself on playing a part in the fall of the Qaddafi regime. This development remains part of a larger, murky picture where U.S. foreign policy towards the Arab world remains perceived with a degree of suspicion by the Arab

street. With Obama having been thrust into the limelight as the United States' primary public diplomacy messenger, whatever policy action the United States chooses next must take into account this new role for the president. Whatever the president chooses to say must also be coupled with concrete policy measures, or else U.S. public diplomacy messages will be condemned to falling on deaf ears in the Arab world.
