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Public Diplomacy and the Arab Islamists ^[1]

For years, Hosni Mubarak and other Arab leaders relied on a straightforward mantra: “It’s me or the Islamists.” American presidents and other Western leaders shuddered at the word “Islamists” and embraced their thuggish allies. What could be worse than Islamists?

U.S. public diplomacy followed that pattern. Over the years, there was some splendid rhetoric from Condoleezza Rice, Barack Obama, and a few others, but the “public” at which public diplomacy was aimed was always carefully limited to exclude the Islamist community.

Now that the events of 2011 have turned Arab politics upside down, U.S. policymakers are facing what they hate most: irrelevance. Those who were so long ignored by American public diplomacy are finally gaining power, as evidenced by the successes of the Ennahda Party in Tunisia, which won 40 percent of the vote in that country’s first free elections, and the Freedom and Justice Party, organized by the Muslim Brotherhood, in Egypt which will be the dominant force in Egypt’s new parliament. In Morocco, Libya, and elsewhere, once marginalized Islamists also find themselves in the mainstream.

Those designing U.S. public diplomacy must quickly recalibrate their work to better reach the newly empowered and assertive mass publics. Senate Foreign Relations Committee chair John Kerry got it right when he recently met with leaders of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood and said, “You’re certainly going to have to figure out how to deal with democratic governments that don’t espouse every policy or value you have.” He added, “The United States needs to deal with the new reality.”

Finally, some common sense. For the United States to refuse to work with Islamists would mean having no clout within the transformed Arab world. The diplomatic imperative is clear: accept the results of democratic elections and build new relationships.

Those in the policy community who continue to flirt with the Egyptian military and other remnants of the *ancien regime* cling to the idea that money will prevail over all else – that U.S. aid will prove so alluring that Arab states will conform to American interests as they have done in the past. That outlook fails to account for Qatar and some other Gulf states, which are displacing Saudi Arabia as the region’s go-to sources for economic support. Qatar proved it was ready to step up when it provided substantial financial and technical assistance to Libya’s rebels, and with its vast resources it could replace funding from Western sources not sympathetic to the new political trends in the Middle East.

U.S. public diplomacy has come a long way since the months after the 2001 attacks. The earliest public diplomacy efforts depicted Muslims in America as being blissfully happy, which was irrelevant to Muslims elsewhere in the world. Focus gradually shifted to more useful projects, such as helping Arab entrepreneurs reshape their countries’ antiquated economies. The next step, given the rise of Islamist political power, will be to better incorporate a

respectful understanding of Islam in the design of public diplomacy programs.

This can be a difficult business, particularly because the “Islamists” finding political success in Egypt and elsewhere range from younger members of the Muslim Brotherhood who see the value of developing a broad popular base, including women, to the hard-core Salafis whose literalist approach to the Quran would lead to a restrictive political sphere in which women and those not in line with their standards would be excluded.

A key element of U.S. public diplomacy is the reflection of American political values in outreach efforts. These values are not antithetical to the tenets of Islam, and so that is where public diplomacy programs should focus. Those designing cultural, educational, and business-related ventures should themselves be familiar with the Quran and other elements of Islam and should involve clerical and lay Muslims in the project creation process. This will help avoid the accidental cultural clashes that can be interpreted as purposeful assertion of anti-Islamic policy.

Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright has suggested that U.S. embassies include a religion diplomacy officer whose expertise would include the ability to navigate these difficult routes toward policy development. Embassies in the Arab world would be the perfect places to try out this idea.

The Islamists who were once viewed as adversaries by American policymakers are now in the mainstream of Arab politics. In Egypt and other Arab states, their efforts are helping to stabilize emerging democracies. U.S. public diplomacy needs to catch up with this new reality.