


Nov 04, 2016 by [Lina Khatib](#)

An Opportunity to Engage: U.S. Public Diplomacy and the Rise of Islamist Parties ^[1]

One year after the Arab Spring, American public diplomacy is still facing the now-established conundrum of linking words and actions. The rise of Islamist political parties as the new leaders in the Arab world is the latest challenge for U.S. public diplomacy, but it is also an opportunity.

Since the attacks of September 11, the United States has been matching its military activity in the Middle East with outreach to Muslim and Arab communities. By and large, this outreach has not been successful. As several public diplomacy experts have been arguing for a number of years now , the limited impact of this outreach is due to the negative perception of U.S. foreign policy towards the Middle East by citizens in the region. When actions and words do not match, words are perceived with a hefty dose of suspicion.

When the Egyptian revolution began on January 25, 2011, U.S. foreign policy took some time to catch up with sentiment on the Egyptian street. To make matters worse, the “Made in USA” tear gas canisters that protesters in Tahrir Square angrily displayed to the cameras of the international media were a further reminder of the United States’ cozy relationship with the Mubarak regime.

Since then, the U.S. has improved its words and actions by declaring both rhetorical and policy support for the Arab world’s revolutionaries (albeit in varying degrees), and as a result, public opinion about the U.S. in the region has improved. The 2011 Arab Public Opinion Poll shows a significant increase in favorability towards the U.S., compared with the 2010 poll, from 10% to 26%. The U.S. must continue to enhance this record.

Back in 2006, after much hype by the U.S. about the importance of free and fair elections in Palestine, the U.S. backtracked when Hamas swept the Palestinian Legislative Council elections in Gaza, withdrawing aid and boycotting the elected Gaza government. As Islamist parties sweep free and fair elections in one country after another in the region—starting with Tunisia, then Egypt—it is fairly safe to declare that in the immediate aftermath of the Arab Spring, the Arab world will be led by Islamists. So far, the U.S. has not repeated the mistake of 2006 with Hamas’ election in Gaza, accepting the results of the elections as democratic and as representing the will of the people.

But this is not enough. Of course, the United States currently has an easier task, since none of the groups that have been elected to-date in the Arab region are on the U.S.’s “terrorist” list. However, merely accepting election results will not cause a significant change in the perception of the U.S. on the Arab street.

The U.S. recognizes the current period as one of opportunity: it is the time to reinvigorate U.S. assistance with civil society, economic aid, and cultural outreach in the Arab world. But the

most important “action” of all remains how foreign policy will play out. The Islamist groups that have assumed leadership positions in Tunisia and Egypt, namely Ennahda and the Muslim Brotherhood, have one very old dream: to be recognized as statesmen nationally and internationally. If U.S. foreign policy in this new era is going to be successful, it must be based on treating those leaders as such.

This is not just important on the traditional diplomatic level; it is also important for the success of U.S. public diplomacy. The Islamist leaders now assuming positions as Prime Ministers or House Speakers (and who knows, perhaps also presidents in the near future) reached power through having been elected by their constituents. The U.S. cannot reach out to those constituents while treating their leaders differently. In the past, U.S. public diplomacy towards Egypt appeared insincere because the U.S. attempted to engage the Egyptian people while taking a soft stance towards the Mubarak regime, which had been jailing, harassing, and—as in the case of Khaled Said—killing those same people.

For the first time in the Arab world’s history, there is a real opportunity for the U.S. to match its words and actions towards the region, and to have foreign policy become the basis upon which to formulate a truly engaging public diplomacy.
