

Nov 04, 2016 by [APDS Bloggers](#)

Missing Priorities in Public Diplomacy – Egypt ^[1]

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The practice of public diplomacy has evolved over past decades towards countries such as Egypt. From cultural exchanges and international development efforts of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) to the Jimmy Carter peace initiatives with the U.S. and other allies, the relations between the U.S. and Egypt have been defined by numerous public diplomacy initiatives. Likewise, the challenges the U.S. faces in engaging and “winning” audiences in the Middle East have also drastically changed, over the last ten years. Since the onset of the Arab Spring, the rhetoric quickly changed from “why do they hate us” to “free and fair democratic elections.” The faces of power in many countries of the Middle East are changing and so is the U.S. message.

In the transition from dictatorial leaders to democratically elected leadership, the question must be posed: what are present priorities of U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East? And, what are the public diplomacy priorities towards Egypt, one of America’s strongest regional allies?

Three main priorities for the United States in regards to Egypt have emerged during the revolution:

1) Laying a Democratic Framework

Slowly but surely, a democratic blueprint is being laid for citizen engagement, transparent elections, and accountable governance. As the U.S. engages Egypt in helping to craft democracy, it is critical to take into consideration that the foundations of democracy have never truly been established in Egypt. Essential tenets of democracy such as freedom of speech, expression, and access to quality education are not underlying values in Egypt and pose monumental challenges to the democratic and political future of Egypt. The diplomatic approach of the United States must be one bearing all these factors in mind, providing expertise, knowledge, and assistance to Egypt as it is needed.

Democracy can be dangerous business when there is not a proper structure and context in which people can engage. Helping Egyptians to build their own political and socio-economic structure is the very thing the U.S. should focus on reinforcing through public diplomacy.

2) Women’s protection and rights

During the Egyptian revolution, there were far too many reports of women being groped, beaten, sexually assaulted with virginity tests, and treated in barbaric ways. Horrific accounts by famous Egyptian journalist Mona Eltahawy, American journalist Caroline Sinz, and British journalist Natasha Smith (and the list goes on) attest to the dire need for attention and action

to be taken regarding women's rights and protection in Egypt. Women's rights/protection is related to democracy promotion initiatives in Egypt because many of the assailants were members of the army, police, and other public institutions while many of the victims were foreigners. A 2008 study by the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights (ECWR) found that 98 percent of foreign female visitors and 83 percent of Egyptian women have experienced sexual harassment. Sixty-two percent of men admitted to harassing women, while 53 percent blame women for "bringing it on." International news agencies such as the BBC and New York Times have written headline stories on the "sexual harassment cancer in Egypt". In this article, the BBC cites another study conducted by the ECWR on different perspectives of foreign and Egyptian women to sexual harassment. Western women exhibited a strong sense of women's rights and entitlement to being protected, while Egyptian women were not aware of the fact that the individual who harassed them was a criminal, regardless of what clothes they were wearing (whether or not they were an average citizen.) This mindset is so engrained in many men and women that the ECRW has an uphill battle ahead of them but is starting to advocate for legislation criminalizing sexual harassment in Egypt.

As the U.S. considers new public diplomacy initiatives in Egypt, perhaps it should take a look at initiatives started by U.S. nationals living/working in Egypt such as HarassMap. This is an initiative started by Rebecca Chiao, an American living in Egypt who was a victim of sexual harassment. HarassMap uses social media to draw attention to street harassment and coordinate outreach activities to encourage bystanders to protect victims. This online tool that allows women to anonymously report harassment via text message so that incidents are publicly reported, but the victims do not feel at risk. The site pinpoints "hot spots," areas where harassment is most prevalent.

3) The rise of slum communities and economic development

The Egyptian revolution started as an economic cry for help, responding to high unemployment rates, food price inflation, and low minimum wage. Before being democratic in nature, it was strictly economic. As Tunisian Mohamed Bouazizi lit himself on fire, the Middle East watched and the Arab Spring awoke. Neither Egypt nor the U.S. should forget that the heart of the Egyptian Revolution was and is the poor. With a population of over 82 million and an increasing rate of unemployment, Egypt's poverty rates are bound to increase unless multi-sector poverty reduction initiatives are enforced. For so long the relationship between poverty and public diplomacy has too often been disconnected, especially in Egypt where the stronger focus has been on cultural exchange. However, as Egypt transforms, so must public diplomacy in the region, looking dead on at the biggest challenge in the country – the poor. In Cairo, there has been a rampant increase in the formation of informal settlements, and in some areas, garbage villages. These informal settlements are growing in number and most lack access to clean water, electricity, and other public services. Cairo is laden with 5 major garbage villages, one of which has become a cultural touring sight for foreign embassy tours in Egypt. A once unapproachable and shunned village is now one of the stops for foreign diplomats and visitors to Egypt. Poverty truly is a phenomenon and Egypt is slowly realizing this problem of its strikingly visible poverty stricken settlements.

Organizations working with government ministries such as Spirit of Youth in the Mokattam Garbage Village are prime examples of education and policy based development initiatives. American film maker Mai Iskandar produced an award winning film titled "Garbage Dreams" on this epidemic of informal settlements, specifically focused on one garbage village and the efforts of the organization Spirit of Youth to empower, educate, and formalize these

communities into the government system of waste management.

As Egypt shifts its domestic focus to different economic initiatives, U.S. public diplomacy initiatives should also mimic this shift in priorities. During the Revolution, the U.S. and other Western nations were often perceived as meddling in the affairs of Egyptians. One way to remedy this is to partner alongside the Egyptian government and Egyptian civil society, of which numerous American nationals reside, in supporting initiatives that promote American democratic values of equality, protection, access to basic resources, and human rights. As the U.S. partners in the region on a multi-sector scale (with government, private sector, and NGOs), the image of the U.S. will transform from a nation providing military aid to a partner in the region, committed to helping build the capacity and responding to the pulse of the people in a New Egypt.

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