

Nov 04, 2016 by **Philip Seib**

The Morsi Visit and New Guideposts for U.S. Public Diplomacy ^[1]

Egypt's president, Mohamed Morsi, is visiting the United States for the first time since taking office, and in an interview with the *New York Times* shortly before departing Cairo, he provided insights not only about his style of leadership but also about how Egypt has changed since the 2011 revolution that marked the end of Hosni Mubarak's lengthy rule.

As Egypt and the larger Arab world evolve, so too must U.S. public diplomacy change to conform to the region's new realities. No longer will the Middle East be dominated by leaders such as Mubarak, who was willing to surrender Egypt's autonomy in exchange for large amounts of American aid and tolerance of his ruthless corruption. Egyptians knew what was going on. Morsi told the *Times*, "Successive American administrations essentially purchased with American taxpayer money the dislike, if not the hatred, of the peoples of the region."

Morsi added that Arabs and Americans have "a shared objective, each to live free in their own land, according to their customs and values, in a fair and democratic fashion." For those in the West engaged in public diplomacy directed toward the Arab states, the key words there are "their customs and values." The West has long conducted hubristic diplomacy, assuming that its norms and mores will be emulated by the rest of the world. From Muslim countries (and also nations such as China), we are now seeing pushback grounded in reassertions of cultural and national pride.

Since the 2001 attacks on the United States, American public diplomacy has gradually developed greater sophistication in terms of its respect for Islamic and Arab culture, but that gradualism must now accelerate to keep pace with the confident assertion of Arab identity by millions still relishing the transformations begun in the Arab revolutions. A certain awkwardness still can be found among Americans slow to abandon the stereotyping – the "othering" – that for so long has pervaded relations with Muslims in the Arab world and elsewhere.

Given Americans' high self-regard in terms of their professed commitment to lofty moral standards, respecting the more visible dedication to the tenets of Islam in the Arab world should not be difficult to accept. In his interview, Morsi cited his days as a doctoral student at the University of Southern California and noted his discomfort with the sexual behavior and street violence he encountered in Los Angeles. That he takes such matters seriously presumably mirrors sentiments of many other Arabs, and this sends a signal to American public diplomats that they must calibrate their efforts accordingly.
