

Nov 04, 2016 by [Philip Seib](#)

In the Middle East, a Tipping Point for U.S. Public Diplomacy ^[1]

DUBAI --- From boil to simmer and back again. It never ends. Political passions in the Middle East do not cool.

I have been visiting Arab countries frequently during the past five years, which certainly does not make me an expert. But I have been here often enough to pick up on the change in mood during the past few months. The cautious hopefulness that flowered after the Arab uprisings of 2011 has withered, replaced by a fearful fatalism about what lies ahead.

Attacks on American diplomatic outposts in Benghazi and elsewhere are now assumed to be the work of the loosely connected network we call "Al Qaeda." Reports from Jordan indicate that elements of this network were recently preparing a sophisticated attack on the American Embassy in Amman, as well as other targets elsewhere in the region. As a matter of fundamental self-defense, the United States must deal forcefully with those who plan and conduct such attacks. The United States cannot allow its ambassadors to be killed or its overseas missions to be trashed. Those responsible for such acts must be held to account, if not by their home countries then by American power.

But it is important to remember that these are criminal acts perpetrated by a small number of thugs, and not the collective action of any nation or religion. When I met with a group of Libyan journalists immediately after the Benghazi attack, I found no reason to doubt the sincerity of their dismay and their repudiation of violence. As they put it, the attack may have been carried out by a few Libyans, but not by Libya.

Far more complicated is the situation in Syria. Its murderous disorder is infecting neighboring countries, as is evidenced by the bloodshed in Lebanon. Syria is at the root of the unease among my colleagues here in Dubai. They are from Lebanon, Jordan, and elsewhere in the Arab world, and I have never before seen them so worried.

The reason, which U.S. policymakers are coming to recognize, is that the bad guys are on the rise. As evidenced by events in Libya, Al Qaeda did not die with Osama bin Laden, and now many of those watching Syria carefully warn that the "Free Syrian Army" and other anti-Assad factions should not automatically be embraced as "freedom fighters," but rather should be watched warily. Clearly, the Syrian fighters number among them Al Qaeda fighters from throughout the region, and others in their ranks are more intent on post-Assad revenge than on reform.

The American response should be based on a two-level strategy. The first requires an unabashed embrace of hard power when it is needed. The fight against a reconstituted Al Qaeda must be waged assertively, because, as the tepid response to Al Qaeda during the 1990s should have taught us, anything less than concentrated lethal force, when required, lets

terrorists' bravado and strength increase.

The second level is more complicated, requiring brains more than brawn. The rebuilding of the Arab world after the revolutions that began in 2011 remains an essential task for countries such as the United States that believe that the yearnings for democracy among most Arabs are genuine and that a hopeful future can be found once the debris of tyranny is cleared away.

This is where soft power is important. America's public diplomacy must continue to reach out to Arab publics that are willing to consider the merits of modernized and liberalized economic and political life.

That constituency is far larger than the one lining up behind the violent fanatics. Although no one knows for certain what ideas run through the decayed minds of Al Qaeda supporters, it is not unreasonable to assume that attacks on U.S. diplomatic missions were designed at least in part to undermine Americans' willingness to assist the governments that have come to power since the transformative events in the region that began last year. Progress is anathema to Al Qaeda and its kin; empowering women and fostering political reform are intolerable to those whose version of Islam is grounded in barbarism.

Reaching those willing to move forward into the future is a task for U.S. public diplomacy, but maintaining political support for this process will require a better understanding of Arab culture than most Americans possess, and it will need a commitment to remain supportive of new Arab governments during a prolonged period of transition. Within the United States, backing for such American efforts is fragile. According to surveys conducted by the University of Maryland, Americans' favorable opinion of Arabs dropped from 56 percent in April 2011 to 49 percent this month, and suspicion about the democratic intent of the uprisings has grown.

America's public diplomats face the formidable challenge of undercutting radicals' support by helping improve the lives of the vast majority of Arabs. Their concerns are similar to those found elsewhere in the world: jobs, housing, education, health care, and the other basics of a decent life. Helping to build the foundation for that kind of life should be the driving force for American public diplomacy. The alternative is reliance on the hard power that has clearly proved to be of little lasting value in this region.
