

Nov 04, 2016 by [Gordon Robison](#)

Some Thoughts on Foreign Hospitals and Public Diplomacy ^[1]

Amman, Jordan

If advertising pitches are anything to go by, winding up in a foreign hospital appears to be a recurrent nightmare among Americans traveling overseas. My own first encounter with non-American medical care only reinforced this. Visiting a fellow teenager at a London hospital in 1980 I arrived in something that resembled a 30's style cancer ward in a Hollywood movie. It seemed rather severe for a guy with a broken leg.

I'm sad to report that I have spent the last two weeks dealing with doctors and hospitals here in Amman after my daughter was involved in a serious car accident, but happy to add that the hospital here looked a lot better than that British one I visited a quarter-century ago. My daughter received excellent and caring treatment and is now back at home and on the way to what her doctors expect to be a full recovery.

An American doctor who looked at my daughter when she was still in intensive care assured her mother and me that she was as well-off here as she would have been in an American hospital. By the time she came home a week ago it was an analysis I would not dream of debating.

If public diplomacy is the exercise of "soft power", then one of its great manifestations is American medical education. Walk around the better-off sections of any Middle Eastern city and look at the signs outside of doctor's offices. Anyone who trained in the West in general and the United States in particular puts that fact on the sign. The result is a cadre of well-trained doctors whose services are available throughout the region at a fraction of what they would cost back in the United States (note to academic readers – figuring out how much of the price difference can be attributed to lower labor costs and how much to lower malpractice insurance rates might make for an interesting journal article).

The quality of the doctors and the medical care here also highlights another aspect of Americans sometimes silly approach to the world beyond our shores. I've been shopping around recently for both medical and life insurance and I can assure you that finding either if you live in this part of the world is not easy. The irony is that Amman is in many respects far safer than any comparably-sized American city. Street crime is nearly non-existent when compared to, say, Los Angeles. The last time I was on the USC campus the first thing I ran into was a kiosk selling pepper spray ("Campus Special: \$11.50 / 2 for \$20). I'm pretty sure I'll never see that on the campus of Jordan University or the American University in Cairo.

"You live and work in a dangerous place" one insurance agent told me, by way of explaining why her company would not come near me with a 50-foot pole. Perhaps. But it is good to know that if something does go wrong I'll be able to find the sort of care I need just up the

road.

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