

Nov 04, 2016 by **Philip Seib**

Revitalized Arab States Should Embrace Public Diplomacy ^[1]

While the Arab political system is being rebuilt after this year's regional upheaval, Arab states should also look outward and consider how they wish to reposition themselves within the global community.

Although many non-Arab countries have developed elaborate public diplomacy programs directed toward the Arab world, most Arab governments have shown little interest in reciprocating this approach. Arab states engage in far too little outreach, even to other Arabs close to home. Perhaps this is because they have been unimpressed – and justifiably so – by much of the public diplomacy that has been sent their way. Many Arab-oriented public diplomacy efforts undertaken by the United States, China, Russia, and others have tended to be condescending and unimaginative.

But the Arab Awakening of 2011 has captured the world's interest, and failing to capitalize on that would mean missing a valuable opportunity to move the Arab states more fully into the global mainstream.

For much of the world, Arabs remain wrapped in myth. They are often seen as a menacing “other” that had best be treated warily. Few non-Arabs know about the rich history of Arab arts, science, and literature. Instead, stereotypes prevail, and in the minds of many, “Arab” equates with “terrorist.”

Numerous Arab countries could be stronger regional and global leaders if they mounted more sophisticated public diplomacy programs. Within the region, an offset to Iran's erratic ambitions is essential, and given how oil-centric much of modern society remains, the producing states should be serious players around the world.

To date, the Arab country with the best developed public diplomacy is Qatar. Its creation of Al Jazeera, its successful bid for the 2022 World Cup, and, more recently, its quiet but effective assistance to the anti-Qaddafi rebels in Libya have given it a positive identity among many Arab and non-Arab publics. Other Arab states need not follow this same agenda, which few countries can afford, but Qatar's success proves that Arab states *can* be international leaders.

Public diplomacy can take shape in various ways. The United Arab Emirates recently pledged to pay up to a million dollars to purchase laptop computers for students in Joplin, Missouri after a tornado destroyed ten of the city's schools. The UAE had also given the U.S. government \$100 million to help rebuilding efforts after Hurricane Katrina in 2005. But there has not been adequate systematic follow-up to these generous instances of public diplomacy. Cultural exchanges, for example, could be used more extensively by Arab states. And now the Arab Spring lends itself to “how we did it” presentations around the world (at least in countries that are not too nervous about allowing exponents of democracy to explain their

work).

The Arab states should do more to institutionalize public diplomacy as an integral part of their respective foreign policies, making it more central in the work of their foreign ministries. Although reaching out to the non-Arab world is important, Arab-to-Arab public diplomacy should also be emphasized as the region's politics undergo complex changes.

More generally, Arab nations need to commit themselves to continuing public diplomacy efforts that are not dependent on events of the moment. The comprehensive, long-term work of the British Council is a useful model. Furthermore, the study of public diplomacy is expanding rapidly, and Arab scholars and policymakers could benefit from and contribute to the growing body of literature and expertise in this field.

The principal business of the continuing Arab revolutions is to fix the broken domestic political systems that allowed autocratic rulers to hold power for so long. But that effort should be coupled with refocusing Arab perspectives on the rest of the world, and public diplomacy can be a significant part of that process.
