

Public Diplomacy in a Changing Middle East

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Brief Analysis

Watch Undersecretary of State Tara D. Sonenshine's Wednesday address to a Washington Institute Policy Forum on the challenges of projecting American interests and values to Middle Easterners at a time of tumultuous political change.

Speaking to Middle Eastern publics was difficult enough when friendly (and some not-so-friendly) autocrats were in charge; projecting American interests and values to Middle Easterners at a time of tumultuous political change may be even more challenging. To discuss the many facets of U.S. engagement with the region in the post-Tahrir Square era of uncertainty, The Washington Institute invited The Honorable Tara D. Sonenshine to address a Policy Forum luncheon in Washington, DC, on Wednesday, January 16, 2013. Read her prepared remarks below.

Tara D. Sonenshine has served since April 2012 as undersecretary of state for public diplomacy and public affairs. Previously, she was executive vice president of the U.S. Institute of Peace, a senior National Security Council official during the Clinton administration, and an Emmy-winning producer of news programs on domestic and international issues for network television.

PREPARED REMARKS

Thank you, Rob, and my thanks to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy – and the organizers of today's Policy Forum Luncheon series for inviting me today.

I am delighted to speak about our public diplomacy in a region so critically important for the American people. In our hyper-connected world, the world has become a geospatial pinball machine, ringing and pinging with security, economic and cultural connections and implications for all of us; and that ball never stops coming around. So it is very much in our interests to engage fully, energetically, and creatively. There is no more urgent region for such U.S. engagement than the Middle East and North Africa.

The reason is simple. American engagement in the Middle East is good for America and for the region. A more stable, more democratic, and more prosperous Middle East and North Africa region enhances security and prosperity for all. It means greater economic opportunity for young people, for entrepreneurs, for the business community, for educators. And it opens opportunities to deepen personal connections and strategic alliances with

all countries in the region.

I would encourage you to revisit the national security directives of both President Obama and President Bush. They both understand and recognize this.

So how do we engage fully and, more importantly, how do we maximize our chances of success, so that the American people and the people of the region benefit from the current changes sweeping the Middle East and North Africa?

Two words: Public diplomacy.

These two words may sound simple. But they define a critical strategic tool in the full-on campaign of American international engagement –

Public diplomacy has a great many, mutually reinforcing elements. It includes conveying and explaining U.S. policies and values; fostering democratic transition; supporting entrepreneurship and U.S. exports; facilitating educational exchange; and promoting U.S. higher education.

It also fulfills a principle of Secretary Clinton's QDDR – or Quadrennial Diplomatic and Development Review – which underscores the critical importance of reaching out to nongovernmental, and nontraditional audiences.

Today, I'd like to talk about how we employ this deep and complex engagement – which we call American public diplomacy – in such a complicated, fast-moving and volatile region, and why we must redouble our efforts, despite the challenges we face.

First, let me provide some perspective. It was only two years ago, in Doha, that Secretary Clinton warned that the region's foundations were – quote – sinking in the sand. Since then, in countries throughout the region, we've seen demonstrators take to the streets, and the Internet.

We've seen long-standing dictatorships topple, free-fought elections and other aspects of democratic transition and – tragically – a bloody conflict in Syria with a regime attacking its own citizens.

This human narrative – which quickly came to be known as “The Arab Spring” – is still evolving. And the speed with which it unfolded – and continues to unfold – should not distract us from appreciating the deliberative pace that democratic progress demands.

As Americans, we are well aware of our own history. We know that revolution can bring an end to power but sustainable change doesn't happen overnight. The development, ratification, and the continuing evolution of our own Constitution have taken 237 years. So we should look at the region with a sober sense of history, a generous portion of humility, and a patient appreciation for the growing pains of democracy.

Our public diplomacy recognizes these dynamics, and the challenges they embody. We work to do what we always do: contextualize our foreign policies by engaging with foreign publics. We know that, in this region, positive and sustainable change comes from the concerted hard work of citizens, political leaders, NGO's and other partners who are dedicated to pluralistic and inclusive societies.

We also know we cannot let the challenges stop us from moving forward, one diplomatic overture, one multilateral agreement, one program, one exchange, one partnership, and one trade or investment at a time.

That patient understanding of progress is why we need to calibrate our public diplomacy with three distinct settings: the short term, the midterm and the long term. All three are necessary and mutually reinforcing. You can't have one without the other. To illustrate what I mean, I'd like to revisit an episode familiar to all of us.

I am talking about a cheaply made, hateful video that languished unnoticed on the Internet, then emerged to trigger outrage and violence. Thanks to the nature of our hyper-connected world (remember that pinball machine I was

talking about?) it turned viral in many parts of the world – especially Muslim majority countries. Demonstrators in some of those countries targeted our diplomatic missions – even though we had no connection to the filmmaker, or the film.

Led by Secretary of State Clinton, our diplomats went out immediately to provide an American response to the film and the violence it provoked.

Short term warning, short term response.

Our people fanned out across the region, engaging media, officials and key influencers to convey that there was no U.S. Government involvement in the video – and to underscore the importance of freedom of expression.

We emphasized that we did not condone the content of that message. In fact we despised it. But we defended that filmmaker's right to make his opinion known.

This was underscored by President Obama's speech before the United Nations, in which he said – quote: "The strongest weapon against hateful speech is not repression, it is more speech."

Our engagement in the short term emphasized a key value of the United States – freedom of speech and expression – which is also central to our mid and long term public diplomacy efforts.

We also used social media – a major 21st century tool in our public diplomacy toolbox – to ensure our message was disseminated quickly and widely. Using Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, web chats and other media, we confronted the anger head-on.

One web chat connected State Department officials in Washington with hundreds of youth from every country in the region – giving us a chance to dispel widespread myths and misconceptions about American intolerance. We were also able to project an image of the real America – as a tolerant, multi-ethnic, multi-religious society.

It was a difficult time to make so nuanced a message. But we continued to make our points, virtually and face to face. One such example was in the International Visitor Leadership Program. Our flagship exchange program invites journalists, doctors, gender rights advocates, artists, engineers, urban planners, and others to the U.S. to build valuable professional skills – and also to help them network with American counterparts. As they do that, the participants gain a better, more nuanced and accurate understanding of American society, culture, and values.

One of our many visiting groups, representing the region, recently visited the State Department on a journalism exchange. And a journalist asked us: "Why would you allow someone to defame your religion, or any religion? Why is the right to insult people an American value?"

We answered that insulting people is not an American value. And once again, the President's point was reiterated: The best way to combat hate speech is with more speech, not less.

This was a tough lesson for the journalist – and anyone who believes that governments should enforce their own ideas of what speech is appropriate. But we will not – and should never – retreat from supporting and defending this right at home and abroad. As we continue to engage the populations of the Middle East, we must always clarify our values and principles, so we can work towards greater understanding for all.

Of course, the most desirable way to minimize how often we have to put out fires, and correct misunderstandings, is to open doors of trust and avenues of prosperity before they occur.

That is why our public diplomacy is focused on young people. They were a critical force behind the Arab Spring. And they are the region's future change agents. They are the emerging leaders and innovators who can lead their countries and economies to greater productivity and global understanding.

It is also true that they are vulnerable to violent extremist ideologues who use false messages to recruit them into

terrorism.

So though our Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication – or CSCC – we have developed a credible, multifaceted approach to sow doubt about extremist worldview among those being targeted by terrorist recruiters.

From digital engagement in Arabic, Somali, and Urdu – which includes aggressive use of online videos – to creative strategies that reach audiences on the ground in their home countries, we are contesting the communications space used by al-Qa’ida and its supporters.

By making the case against them with the simple weapons of truth and fact, coupled with the skills of modern communicators, we are working to counter falsehoods and influence more reasonable minds. And the fact that al-Qa’ida and its affiliates are warning their followers not to pay attention to CSCC’s messaging is a backhanded badge of honor.

It’s also imperative that we offer alternative futures of educational and economic opportunity. One of the most effective ways that we can do that is through the teaching of English. It is the language of finance, science, diplomacy, banking, and international law. It also enables young people to study in the U.S. and access the training that will maximize their potential for more prosperous futures.

One example in the region is our English Access Micro-scholarship Program, which was initiated in Morocco in 2003, with 17 students. We were targeting nonelite students from 13 to 20 year olds in the Middle East and North Africa.

Since then, its growth has been spectacular.

Now the program reaches 18,000 students, with more than 80,000 alumni in 85 countries throughout the world. And our public diplomacy officers in the field have expanded this kind of English language outreach to journalists, educators, entrepreneurs, religious leaders, and other key influencers across the region.

Providing opportunities for budding entrepreneurs in the region is also important. Through our TechWomen program, for example, we brought Saudi women to Silicon Valley where they engaged directly with some of our most successful entrepreneurs. Think of the messages about gender equality and business opportunity that program sends to those women.

In partnership with Coca-Cola and Indiana University, we have developed a one-month entrepreneurship education program that brought 100 Middle East and North African young leaders to the U.S. last summer. We harnessed the assets and global reach of an American corporation, and connected the college, business and local community in Indiana with emerging leaders from MENA. And those leaders returned to their countries newly empowered to become our potential business or trading partners.

Of course, it’s important that our public diplomacy works to benefit people of all ages and in all different sectors. Supporting civil society is central to that. Since the beginning of the Arab Spring, we have supported the fast growing numbers of civil society practitioners in transitioning countries. We do that primarily through our U.S. Middle East Partnership Initiative – or MEPI.

In Egypt, for example, MEPI has supported training for more than 1,500 NGO staff members and activists through 50 workshops on using social media to develop advocacy and public outreach. MEPI has also partnered with Microsoft to provide free wireless Internet access and training to Libyans in rural and marginalized communities.

We know that Internet access is central to public diplomacy, whether we are using Twitter to express condolences for lives lost in a terrorist attack, or Facebook postings to raise awareness of study opportunities in the United States, or engage people in the topics that matter to us – such as climate change, democracy, and women’s rights.

We are reaching people. Our Embassy in Cairo, for example, has more than half a million Facebook fans. It’s

important to open these conversations, in a country experiencing a challenging transition toward democracy, and constantly shifting views about the United States.

Social media is especially useful when we have no physical presence. In Iran, we just marked the one year anniversary of our Virtual Embassy Tehran website and our Farsi-language social media platforms which include Facebook, Google-plus, Twitter, and a YouTube channel.

These forums highlight our commitment to educational opportunity, freedom of expression, defense of civil liberties, and a voice for the Iranian people. By doing this, we can counter negative regime portrayals of U.S. policy, and create debate and discussion inside Iran to isolate extremists and hardliners, and sow the seeds for democratic change.

Of course, Syria is very much on everyone's minds, as more and more people are suffering at the hands of the Assad regime. To continue our direct connections with the Syrian people, social media has been an effective tool for us. Our U.S. Ambassador to Syria regularly engages with Syrians through our website and Facebook pages, and in face to face meetings with Syrians currently outside the country.

We have 15,000 visitors a month to our embassy website and 11,000 followers on Facebook. That's where we provide information about our assistance efforts to Syria, which are considerable, and where President Obama and Secretary Clinton can send direct messages to the Syrian people.

We are proud that a consortium of U.S. colleges and universities is working to create scholarships for Syrian students who are no longer able to complete their degree within Syria. And we look forward to restarting all of our educational, cultural, and professional exchanges with the transitional authority after the fall of the regime.

As the situation in Syria and other countries make clear, security is a deep concern for many embassies in the region. So we are always assessing and reassessing the balance between our need to engage with the safety of our diplomats. But we consider full engagement – not only through social media but face to face – to be essential to our national interests.

That's what public diplomacy is all about. No matter what the challenges, we can and must continue to engage.

We can and must continue working to be more skillful in our communications, more nimble in our advocacy of U.S. policy, so that we can be even stronger defenders of our own American values and ideals. And so that the work we do contributes to greater safety, security, and prosperity at home and abroad.

I thank you for listening and I look forward to your questions. ❖

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