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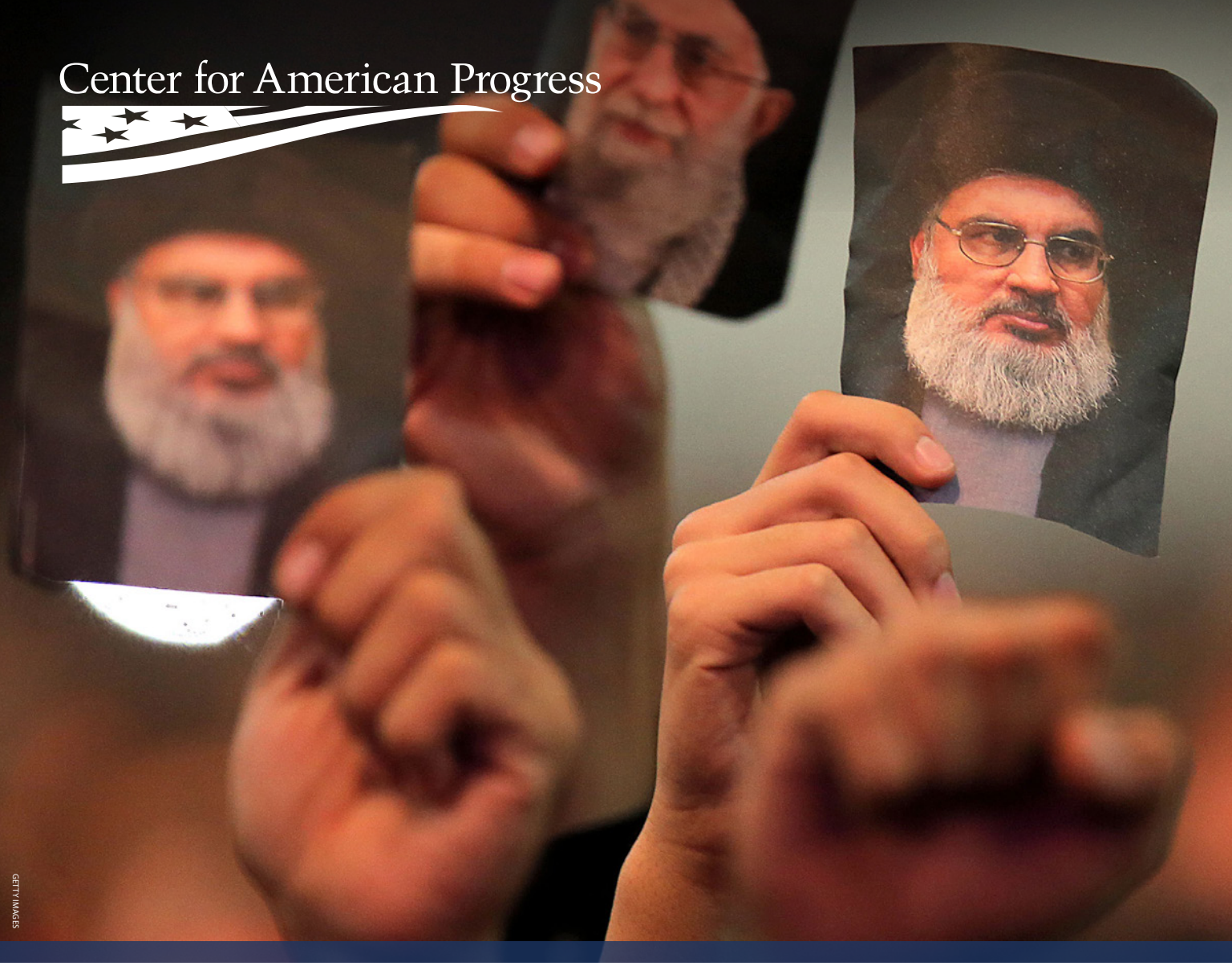

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Tired Narratives, Weary Publics

Public Diplomacy's Role in the Struggle for Influence in the Middle East

By Sarah Alaoui October 2018

Center for American Progress

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Introduction and summary

> *"The priority today is what is called soft war; that is war using cultural tools, through infiltration [of our society], through lies, through spreading rumors. Through the advanced instruments that exist today, communication tools that did not exist 10, 15, and 30 years ago, have become widespread. Soft war means creating doubt in people's hearts and minds."*[1]
>
> *– Iran Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, November 29, 2009*

No longer do Arab governments have the monopoly on information flows in their countries. The use of mass media technology, combined with a multiplicity of actors—including Europe, Turkey, Russia, and Iran—have made competition in the Middle East information marketplace ever more challenging. Moreover, news consumption in the Middle East has changed, as audiences in the region turn from their television screens to computers and phone apps such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and YouTube to browse headlines.[2] These social media platforms have made it easier for U.S. adversaries such as Russia and Iran to disseminate disinformation as news—including anti-American narratives—on an unprecedented scale and at the same time make it more difficult for the United States to respond.[3] Yet how this battle to shape public opinion in the Middle East affects U.S. influence and interests in the region is often overlooked.

Recently, for example, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube removed hundreds of fake accounts and pages originating in Iran that used anti-Saudi, anti-Israeli, and anti-Trump narratives as part of an influence campaign targeted at users around the world, including in the Middle East.[4] These disinformation campaigns exploit and exacerbate increasingly negative views of American leadership, U.S. soft power, and even American people among publics in the Middle East. In doing so, they undermine U.S. security and economic interests, as well as enhance these actors' influence in the region.[5] The Iranian government is a key purveyor of anti-American rhetoric in the Middle East as it seeks to compete with U.S. influence in the region not only through hard power but also in the arena of public diplomacy.

Iran has emerged as a top priority on the Trump administration's foreign policy agenda, but much of the administration's discourse focuses on Iran's nuclear program and its destabilizing policies in key parts of the Middle East, including Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.[6] The United States counts on economic sanctions, military power, and other hard-power levers to counter Iran. However, the U.S. government lacks a significant, overt effort to tackle a more insidious and largely overlooked dimension of Iran's influence operations in the region: its public diplomacy outreach aimed at shaping the information landscape and public opinion of key audiences in the Arab world. Currently, there is no coherent, consistent strategy in place to respond to disinformation deployed by Iran and other actors that mischaracterize the United States, its policies, and its interests in the region. At the same time, there is an absence of significant, long-term U.S. soft-power outreach—an important component of shaping and amplifying American narratives to Arab audiences in the Middle East.

This report analyzes the government-led public diplomacy efforts of Iran, key Arab states, and the United States in the Middle East, exploring how each actor engages with publics in the region. With a focus on the past 15 years following the 2003 Iraq War, this report examines the various narratives used by each actor and the different public diplomacy tactics used to support them. Finally, the report presents recommendations for the United States to enhance its public diplomacy efforts in the region to better counter and effectively compete with Iran in this space.

While soft power is more broadly defined as "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment,"[7] public diplomacy can be understood as the strategy of leveraging soft-power resources to specifically communicate with, attract, and influence foreign publics.[8] Given the divergent interpretations and execution of public diplomacy by each of the three actors considered here—the United States, Iran, and Arab Gulf states—and the opacity of Iranian and Arab strategy in the region, this study considers any government-led activity—including a sample of media and communications, cultural outreach and programming, and people-to-people exchanges—targeted at attracting or influencing Arab publics to be under the public diplomacy umbrella.

For the record, public diplomacy does not include actions such as humanitarian aid, philanthropic work, or funding Islamic charities, as they rely on payment to exert influence. The activities considered in this report rely on inherent appeal—determined by audience receptivity—and provide an entry point for countries to cultivate rapport and build trust with foreign publics, shape public perceptions of their behavior and that of their adversaries, and enhance their influence.

In analyzing public diplomacy efforts, the author found that:

- **Iran uses public diplomacy in the Middle East as a key component of its efforts to shape regional dynamics.** Relying on a menu of narratives that appeal to popular Arab sensibilities—including anti-imperialism, religion, and the Palestinian cause—transmitted through media broadcasts as well as cultural and religious outreach, Iran regards public diplomacy as pivotal in increasing its influence in the region. Any success the country enjoys in this arena can be attributed not only to inherent advantages such as geographic, religious, and historical proximity but also to its capitalization of the policy blunders of other actors in the region; a long history of using public diplomacy to pursue its interests; and a soft-power vacuum created by the effective absence of Arab governments and the United States in which Iran operates largely uncontested.

- **Leading Arab governments have not engaged in sustained public diplomacy efforts in key arenas of competition with Iran.** Arab governments, especially Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have mostly targeted their public diplomacy resources and efforts at U.S. publics. To exert influence in other Arab countries, these states limit their outreach to governments and elites through traditional channels, or they resort to checkbook diplomacy and coercive measures. Pan-Arab media broadcasts and publications are used to project Saudi and Emirati government agendas, comprising the bulk of their public diplomacy in the region. The two countries also use religious diplomacy and their respective "brand" of Islam to counter what they view as Islamist extremism, including political Islam, and appeal to publics around the region, with mixed results. Saudi Arabia and the UAE benefit from natural affinities with Arab populations, including shared Arab and Sunni Muslim identities, but their image also suffers from their destabilizing roles in conflicts across the Middle East, such as in Yemen; divisive, often sectarian messaging; and a failure to present concrete, forward-looking counternarratives that address public attitudes and concerns.

- **U.S. public diplomacy in the region is hindered by perceptions about U.S. policy and recent administration efforts that have cut resources for the State Department and other agencies engaged in soft power.** U.S. public diplomacy outreach in the Middle East has been a persistent challenge for practitioners due to unpopular American policies in the region and an overall decline in global American influence, compounded by the presidency of Donald Trump.[9] And while the Trump administration has made countering Iran a regional priority, there is no apparent effort to develop a complementary public diplomacy strategy or an American counternarrative that directly competes with Iran in the influence space of key Arab countries. This influence vacuum is further exacerbated by the lack of a clear U.S. Middle East strategy and the downgrading of a values-based approach to diplomacy.

U.S. adversaries such as Iran are making use of public diplomacy not only to increase their own influence in the Middle East but also to galvanize Arab publics against the United States in a relatively cost-effective way. Meanwhile, the United States has mainly focused on hard power and economic sanctions to counter Iran in the region, ceding the battleground of public diplomacy. Of course, public diplomacy cannot erase unpopular policies, which the United States, Iran, and Arab Gulf states all grapple with, but it would be short-sighted to turn a blind eye to how Arab public perception of American power directly affects the United States' ability to achieve policy goals in the Middle East.

However, the U.S. government has an opportunity to enhance its own public diplomacy in the region and reframe narratives portraying America as the primary force for ill in the Middle East, thanks in part to Iran's involvement in regional conflicts, which is increasingly denting its appeal among Arab publics.[10] To take advantage of this opportunity, the U.S. government must establish a successful public diplomacy strategy in the region by:

- Designating a full-time undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs to oversee all U.S. engagement with foreign publics
- Creating an interagency team as part of the Iran Action Group focused on competing with Iranian public diplomacy in the Middle East and countering anti-American narratives
- Developing a U.S. metanarrative that puts mutual American and Arab interests—including education, economic prosperity, and shared values of pluralism and tolerance—at its core foundation
- Combating Iranian disinformation with factual information
- Redoubling moral and financial support for U.S. public diplomacy practitioners in the Arab world
- Committing to a zero-tolerance policy against Islamophobic and intolerant rhetoric both domestically and abroad
- Resisting sectarian and inflammatory language and encouraging Arab government allies to do the same
- Seizing opportunities to de-escalate conflicts in Syria and Yemen

Iranian public diplomacy and narratives in the Middle East

For decades, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Islamic Republic) has invested in public diplomacy to promote its narratives and expand its influence across the Middle East, but today's digital age has provided new tools that serve as force multipliers, allowing the government to reach Arab audiences at an unprecedented scale and speed. Iran's understanding of soft power is rooted in an existential need to protect the 1979 revolution's ideals and Islamic values, which it perceives as under attack not only from hard-power sources but also from a "cultural NATO," or Western cultural exports.[11] In 2009, a few months after the disputed presidential election and subsequent Green Movement protests, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei addressed a crowd of Basij members, positioning soft power in the context of Iran's national security, or what he called a "soft war" (jang-e narm).[12] That year, he gave another speech to a group of university students on the same subject, calling on "intellectual elites" to serve on the front lines of the soft war and protect the Islamic Republic's ideological hegemony against imperial powers—specifically, the United States.[13] By 2011, Iranian government officials went from using the phrase "soft war" several dozen times per year to several times per day.[14]

Public diplomacy structure and activities

In addition to a comprehensive messaging strategy that uses radio and television broadcasts, newspapers, websites, and social media accounts to amplify its narratives, Iran's top-down public diplomacy also includes educational, cultural, and religious exchange programs and conferences. Media activities are governed by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), which oversees not only domestic messaging but also outward-facing content.[15] The IRIB operates Arabic-language media stations, including Al-Kawthar TV, which focuses on religious and cultural programming, and Al-Alam News Network, a 24-hour news channel designed to compete with other networks such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya.[16] These stations aim to promote state ideology and more importantly, to "neutralize" rhetoric targeting the Islamic Republic.[17]

Al-Alam was launched in 2003 to coincide with the U.S. invasion of Iraq and started painting a narrative of the conflict a full year before its American counterpart, Alhurra, entered the market.[18] In Iraq, the television channel used both satellite and terrestrial transmission to reach audiences in a country where satellite dishes had been banned under former President Saddam Hussein.[19] One of Al-Alam's stated objectives is to "examine the historic roots of problems Muslims are faced with,"[20] and its programming largely points the finger at the United States, Israel, and their Arab allies as occupiers who only bring devastation to the region.[21] Al-Alam received praise from Shiites in Bahrain for covering the country's 2011 protests, which were largely neglected by Qatari-funded Al Jazeera and Saudi-backed Al Arabiya.[22] Last year, the channel launched an affiliate in Syria and recruited journalism students at Damascus University, offering $360 per month—an appealing sum in a battered economy.[23]

While Al-Alam continues to operate in the region, publicly available data on its viewership and audience share are scant. One survey in 2004 showed that Al-Alam's audience reach in Iraq was only 15 percent, compared with 60 percent for Al Arabiya and Al Jazeera.[24] A 2006 IRIB poll taken in Beirut and southern Lebanon after the Israel-Hezbollah conflict indicated that only 22 percent of the 1,400 adults sampled watched Al-Alam, though Hezbollah station Al-Manar and its battlefield footage may have had more viewers at that time.[25] Leaked Saudi documents show that since 2010, the Arab government was concerned with any sway that Al-Alam may have in the region—particularly in eastern Saudi Arabia, where many Saudi Shiites live, and in Bahrain—and successfully pressured two Arab satellite providers to drop the channel.[26] Other stations in the region, though not explicitly Iran-affiliated, toe the Islamic Republic's line and reinforce its narratives, including Al Mayadeen, launched as the "anti-Al Jazeera" in 2012.[27] As long as U.S. policies remain unpopular in the region, the anti-American posture of the Iranian government and its network of media platforms will play to its advantage.[28]

In Lebanon, Iran's public diplomacy is deeply enmeshed with its support for Hezbollah, the Shiite militia and U.S.-designated terrorist organization that it helped create in 1982.[29] Hezbollah's affiliated channel, Al-Manar, began broadcasting from Beirut in 1991, using graphic battlefield footage of attacks against Israeli soldiers to highlight its role as a force of resistance against Israel.[30] Hezbollah's media arsenal also features music videos and video games—including an online game where players can target Israeli politicians—aimed at spreading its agenda to a younger audience.[31] The station's coverage of Hezbollah advances in southern Lebanon against Israel was marked with pride and nationalism to appeal to audiences both in Lebanon and throughout the Arab world.[32] Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah's rallies and chants of "death to America" are broadcast live on the channel. Al-Manar was also reportedly one of the first sources to circulate the conspiracy theory that blamed Israelis and Jews for the September 11 attacks in the United States.[33]

The Iranian government and its regional proxies frequently resort to conspiracy theories and disinformation campaigns to pad their narratives, often in a way that directly imperils U.S. interests and lives. For instance, during a decisive period of the counter-Islamic State (IS) campaign in Mosul, members of Iraq's Iran-backed Popular Mobilization Forces spread rumors that the U.S. military was protecting and hiding IS' leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.[34] This rumor fell upon willing ears, as other conspiracy theories linking Washington to the creation of IS were already spreading quickly around the region, to the extent that the U.S. Embassy in Beirut felt the need to publish a statement denying the claims.[35] While depicting al-Baghdadi as a U.S. puppet, the Iranian government portrayed itself as the hero on the front line in the combat against IS, circulating photos of Major General Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's Quds Force, drinking tea in Tikrit with Iraqi militia members.[36]

Social media also figures heavily in Iran's messaging structure, with active users among the country's leadership, including President Hassan Rouhani and his foreign affairs minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif. These individuals actively use their social media platforms to reinforce Iranian positions and respond directly to rivals. One particularly heated exchange of tweets took place in 2016 following a *New York Times* editorial by Zarif—"Saudi Arabia's Reckless Extremism."[37] Referencing the article, UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan tweeted in Arabic the following message to 2.5 million followers: "When I read the Iranian foreign minister's article in the *New York Times*, I thought the author was the foreign minister of a Scandinavian country."[38] Two days later, Zarif tweeted a subtle response to his audience of 1.08 million followers without directly mentioning the Emirati foreign minister: "Diplomacy is the domain of the mature; not arrogant nouveau-riche."[39]

In addition to television and social media platforms, Iranian public diplomacy relies on in-person outreach to establish rapport with Arab publics. The Islamic Culture and Relations Organization (ICRO) was created in 1995 to streamline Iran's cultural and religious outreach, and its mission includes strengthening ties with Muslim countries through exhibitions, cultural centers, and other initiatives.[40] In Syria, for instance, the Iranian Cultural Center in Damascus plays a large role in introducing the Islamic Republic's culture and ideology to locals, including those with no prior exposure to the country.[41] With a focus on issues of mutual Iranian and Syrian interests, the cultural center organizes book fairs in Syria, supports Persian departments in the country's universities, and offers annual trips to Iran for top students, and with its Syrian partners, it aims to protect "Islamic culture" from the West.[42]

In Iraq—home to the second-largest Shiite population in the Middle East after Iran—religious ties play an important role in Iran's public diplomacy.*[43] Each year, for example, more than 2 million Iranian Shiites gather in Karbala, Iraq (southwest of Baghdad) for the Arba'een pilgrimage, marking the end of 40 days of mourning for the death of Imam Hussain, a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad who was killed in the Battle of Karbala in 680.[44] The sheer scale of the event—considered the world's largest annual pilgrimage—is conducive to exchanges between Iranian and Iraqi participants. An annual conference co-organized by Allameh Tabataba'i University in Tehran and Iraq's University of Kerbala convenes scholars and researchers to document the event, examine its role in Iraqi culture, and discuss how it can be used to promote religious moderation and peaceful coexistence.[45]

Main narratives of Iran's public diplomacy

Anti-imperialism

Among the actors examined in this report, Iran is the only country that can lay claim to a hardcore anti-imperialist, anti-American narrative. In some ways, the anti-imperialist narrative is its most compelling, as it does not require too much creativity on Iran's part to craft supporting messaging, and the country is able to wield it as long as negative perceptions of U.S. hegemony and Israeli occupation abound in the region. The storyline employs elements from Iran's own history, including run-ins with imperialist powers and foreign meddling. Armed with firsthand accounts of the British-directed coup that established the Pahlavi dynasty in 1921 and the U.S. role in the coup that overthrew Mohammad Mossadeq in 1953, Iran has been able to craft a narrative that has credibility with Arab publics of an oppressed region constantly victimized by Western powers.[46]

Harking back to lessons from its revolution, Iran's anti-imperialist message rejects outside meddling—largely defined as Western—and promotes an independent foreign policy. This narrative also incorporates an anti-monarchist element—a legacy of the Iranian Revolution—that seeks legitimacy through clerical rule in ways that, since 1979, have been inherently threatening to Arab monarchies. One telling example of this narrative on display is Iran's reaction to the Arab uprisings of 2011. The Islamic Republic portrayed the events as an "Islamic Awakening," and pointed to the demise of U.S.-backed Arab leaders as a sign of Iranian ascendance and weakened American and Arab government power.[47]

Islamic unity

Compared with its Arab government counterparts, Iran avoids using sectarian, or overtly pro-Shiite, messaging where possible.[48] Since the revolution, the Islamic Republic has aimed to be seen as a leader of all Muslims and has positioned the United States, Israel, and imperialism as the true enemies of Islam.[49] Amid the 2011 crackdown against Shiite protestors in Bahrain, for instance, Iran's Islamic unity narrative was put to the test as its rhetoric began to take on anti-Sunni qualities.[50] Even then, however, its messaging leaned more toward anti-Saudi, anti-Wahhabi tones rather than explicitly anti-Sunni ones. As part of this narrative, the Iranian government singles out Wahhabism as a key source of terror, in much the same way as Saudi Arabia points fingers at Iranian support for terrorism.[51] The Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, long sought to depict the House of Saud—representatives of the institution of monarchy, which he saw as incompatible with Islam—as corrupt, improper, and unfit to guard the holy sites of Mecca and Medina.[52]

Champions of Palestine

Days after the shah was overthrown in 1979, the new Islamic Republic received its first visiting foreign dignitary: Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat.[53] In a symbolic gesture, the Ayatollah Khomeini offered the Palestine Liberation Organization the keys to the former Israeli Embassy and inaugurated Jerusalem Day as an annual event to cement the Islamic Republic as a champion of the Palestinian cause.[54] Positioning itself this way has allowed Iran to transcend the hurdle of its Persian identity and appeal to Arabs across the Middle East, regardless of their religion. This narrative taps into Arab grievances and the "prism of pain" through which they evaluate outside threats—one that still regards Palestine as a pivotal issue.[55] At its very core, this narrative is pitted against the state of Israel, whose creation, according to Khomeini, is the direct result of Muslim disunity.[56] The Iranian government's vitriol toward Israel often extends into anti-Semitic rhetoric.[57]

Amid signs of a possible rapprochement between Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Israel, the Arab Gulf countries have had to tread a fine line in order to avoid fueling accusations of having abandoned the Palestinian cause.[58] At a 2017 meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), several Muslim countries gathered to show support for Palestine and unite against President Trump's decision to relocate the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Saudi Arabia sent a lower-level delegation, while several heads of state appeared themselves.[59] Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Zarif did not miss the opportunity to provoke the Saudis via tweet: "Inspired by very high level participation at extraordinary OIC summit, despite handful of telling exceptions."[60]

Assessment

Arab government failures, combined with a history of unpopular American policy decisions in the region, have created a fertile ground for Iranian narratives to gain traction.[61] Moreover, the Arab revolutions of 2011 created an opening for Iran to align with different actors on the ground—from the Houthis in Yemen to the Shiite-majority protesters in Bahrain—and expand its influence.[62] While experts disagree on how potent the Palestinian issue remains in Arab psyches today, this narrative potentially provides Iran with a long-term solution to weather the reputational damage it suffered for supporting Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's brutal military campaign.

Iran's anti-imperialist, anti-Israel, and pro-Palestine narratives have generally aligned with its policies, which have helped its credibility as a narrator. Iran has channeled popular discourse and extended support for causes central to Arabs. However, Arab audiences are starting to question Iran's own interventions and destabilizing role in the region and may soon grow weary of these narratives. Moreover, in countries such as Iraq, where Iran once had sway, there is a deepening sense of nationalism and resistance to external attempts to undermine sovereignty.[63]

Iran's support for the Assad regime has also damaged the credibility of its Islamic unity message, as it collaborated in the massacre of more than half a million Syrians—the majority of whom were Sunni Muslims.[64] Moreover, Iran does not represent a model that the majority of Arabs wish to see in their own countries: an internationally isolated, economically struggling nation that has struggled to serve the best interests of its people. While Iran blasts Arab government authoritarianism, it disregards the civil, political, and human rights of its people, with continued executions, discrimination against minorities, and the use of torture against prisoners.[65]

There remain inherent limitations to the appeal of Iran's narrative and activities in the Arab world, including the very real differences between Iranian and Arab histories and culture. Furthermore, Iranians themselves are growing resentful of their government's attention to Arab causes.[66] With growing domestic and international political pressure, the country's leadership may eventually be forced to re-evaluate its regional policies.[67] As one Iranian scholar puts it, "There was a time when Iran would rely on its revolutionary ideology to project power. The Islamic government now finds itself relying on using its power to project ideology."[68]

As long as Khamenei remains the supreme leader, Iran is unlikely to abandon the pillars of anti-Americanism and anti-Israel rhetoric that characterize its anti-imperialist narrative—and indeed constitute the very essence of the Islamic Republic.[69] But even if Iran is not there to carry the narrative, other actors—including Russia, extremist groups, and some Arab intellectuals—will prove all too willing to take the lead.

Arab public diplomacy and narratives in the Middle East

Arab Gulf states—particularly Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—have largely focused their messaging and public diplomacy outreach to publics in the United States. For decades, these countries have used public diplomacy to try to enhance their image and promote their policy interests in Washington: A recent example is Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's charm offensive tour of the United States to build relationships and promote his country's reforms.[70] In the Middle East, however, the countries largely neglect soft power, relying instead on a combination of funding and coercion to project their influence. In the soft-power arena, the Arab Gulf countries use satellite media channels to disseminate their views of current events. These stations give their owners a tight grip on the information space and the power to export the narratives they wish. Beyond messaging through media platforms, however, there is no coherent Gulf Arab state public diplomacy apparatus that aims to compete with Iranian soft-power influence in the region.

Public diplomacy structure and activities

Arab Gulf states do not conduct public diplomacy in the Middle East in the traditional sense, instead relying on state-funded pan-Arab satellite networks to amplify their preferred narratives. The content of these networks also reflects the international image their sponsors wish to cultivate. Saudi-backed television news channel Al Arabiya, for instance, aims to be associated with progress, reform, and moderation.[71] It promotes anti-Islamist views and often reflects the interests of the ruling elite and liberal-minded, secular Arabs.[72] Qatar-owned Al Jazeera, on the other hand, was created with the intention of moving the camera away from elites to air the grievances of ordinary people in the region.[73]

Through their news decisions, both stations have crafted narratives catering to audiences on opposing sides of various regional conflicts: Al Jazeera is regarded as favoring Hamas and the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, for example, while Al Arabiya favors the Palestinian Authority and the Egyptian government under former

President Hosni Mubarak and current President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Both are seen as operating within the "red lines" of their respective funders.[74] Al Jazeera is often accused of fueling anti-Americanism and providing extremists with a platform.[75] Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, as part of their ongoing boycott of Qatar, have demanded the shutdown of Al Jazeera.[76]

Beyond its backing of satellite networks, Saudi Arabia's positive diplomacy outreach to Iraq since 2014 may represent the most promising example of Gulf Arab public diplomacy in the Middle East.[77] In early 2016, as part of its efforts to engage with Iraq, Riyadh reopened its embassy in Baghdad, and last year, flights between Saudi Arabia and Iraq were resumed after almost three decades. An exhibition soccer match was organized between the Saudi and Iraqi national teams in Basra, and Saudi poets traveled to the city for a poetry festival.[78] In addition to these public diplomacy gestures, Saudis have examined potential investments in Iraqi sectors, including power generation and helping secure the construction of a Coca-Cola factory in the country.[79] These largely symbolic gestures reflect an unprecedented level of dialogue between the two countries and appeal to Iraqis' Arab identity regardless of religious background.[80]

In Lebanon, by contrast, Saudi Arabia has mostly resorted to coercive measures, including economic leverage, to cultivate influence and pursue its interests. After Saudi Arabia's crown prince purportedly forced the resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, which played out on Saudi television and stemmed from disagreements about Hezbollah's role in Lebanon, bilateral relations have remained fraught.[81] Saudi Arabia's attempts to counter Iranian influence in Lebanon and among Lebanese diaspora working in Gulf countries, by using economic carrots and sticks, disproportionately affect Sunnis and Christians over Shiites.[82] Beyond these coercive activities, Saudi Arabia has not formulated a public diplomacy strategy or concerted outreach in Lebanon that appeals to shared values or interests. As a result, the Saudi government missed an opportunity for outreach to Lebanese Shiites and Christians who view Hezbollah as a bulwark against Sunni extremism.[83]

Saudi Arabia and the UAE also use religious public diplomacy, in tandem with countering violent extremism (CVE) programming, to promote their embrace of a more moderate, tolerant interpretation of Islam. These efforts include multilateral initiatives such as Hedayah, a center hosted by the Emirati government and focused on CVE research and best practices, and the Sawab Center, a joint UAE and U.S. program created to combat extremist narratives and propaganda.[84] During U.S. President Trump's May 2017 visit to Saudi Arabia, he and King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud inaugurated the Global Center for Combating Extremist Ideology (GCCEI), also known as Etidal ("moderation"),

which boasts "unprecedented technical superiority in the tools and technologies used to combat online extremism" as a comparative advantage.[85] This aspect of Arab Gulf public diplomacy aims to position these countries as global leaders of moderate Islam and the fight against extremism—a narrative that is projected globally but is especially designed to resonate with the West.

Compared with Saudi Arabia, the UAE has a more sophisticated understanding of public diplomacy, having established a Public Diplomacy Office in 2014.[86] In addition to targeting Western audiences, Emirati public diplomacy has also focused on launching pan-Arab initiatives, such as a literacy challenge to promote reading in the Arab world[87] and a coding initiative to teach programming and provide support to software developers.[88] Whereas Arab cities such as Damascus, Baghdad, and Cairo are historically renowned as some of the region's cultural hubs, Abu Dhabi has also recently invested heavily in education and the arts, placing it on the map as a stable destination for Arab culture connoisseurs.[89] An annual survey of youth in the Arab world conducted by a Dubai-based firm continues to show that young people in the region look to the UAE as a country to emulate, but the feasibility of exporting the UAE model remains to be seen.[90]

Main narratives of Arab public diplomacy

Anti-Iran

The extent to which Gulf countries, and Saudi Arabia in particular, rely on messaging vilifying the Islamic Republic of Iran amounts to its own free-standing narrative. These countries are the most vocal about perceived Iranian meddling in the Arab world and place the threat at the forefront of their priorities. While their concerns may be warranted to a certain degree, some experts warn that the narrative of an omnipresent, omnipotent Iranian threat distracts from pressing domestic issues, including the grievances of Shiite populations living in Gulf countries.[91] The anti-Iran narrative plays a central role in the Saudi-led blockade against Qatar; therefore, it is not surprising that scaling down diplomatic ties with Iran is the first demand in a 13-point list of demands by the blockading nations.[92]

At the same time, this messaging assumes an Arab audience that views Iran as a primary existential threat, despite some existing polling evidence to the contrary.[93] Earlier this summer, a survey based on face-to-face interviews with 18,830 Arabs across 11 countries in the region—including Lebanon and Iraq—showed that when asked to "name the country that poses the largest threat to their national security," 82 percent of respondents pointed to Israel; 70 percent pointed to the United States;

and 47 percent pointed to Iran.[94] This finding has been consistent with polling conducted over the past 10 years.[95] However, the sheer volume of anti-Iran messaging—whether truthful or not—may increase hostility toward Iran among Arab publics.

The anti-Iran narrative allows Arab Gulf governments to paint a wide spectrum of issues in the region—from internal discontent to extremism and terrorism—as the result of Iranian meddling. As one researcher noted, Saudi Arabia's definition of a terrorist is the Iranian regime, and Saudi talking points about terrorism reflect this belief.[96] In spite of the vitriol it aims at Tehran, Saudi Arabia appears to be concerned with how Iranian publics perceive the kingdom and has launched Farsi-language television programming.[97] More recently, it has partnered with British newspaper *The Independent* to develop news websites in several languages, including Farsi.[98]

Arab identity

Unlike their Iranian and American counterparts, Arab governments benefit from a narrative focused on a shared Arab identity.[99] Akin to the pan-Arabism of the 1950s and 1960s—without the secular element—the appeal indirectly calls on Arabs to turn their backs on Tehran and look to their own governments. This has recently gained traction in Iraq, where Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr has repositioned himself as a nationalist leader and Saudi public diplomacy has made inroads in the country.[100] Saudi Arabia, in speaking about its involvement and goals in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, often makes references to bringing the countries back into the "Arab fold," implying they are under the sway of Iran.[101] This narrative places pressure on countries in the region to choose between Iran and Saudi Arabia and its allies.

Islamic unity

Like the Iranians, the Saudis have also taken on a pan-Islamic message, leveraging their role as custodian of Islamic holy sites Mecca and Medina. Historically, the Saudi government used pan-Islamism to compete with other prevailing ideologies such as the secular Arab nationalism of Egypt's late president Gamal Abdel Nasser, as well as to bolster its legitimacy as a leader of Islam—especially following the emergence of revolutionary Iran.[102] It created institutions, including the Muslim World League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference, to promote Muslim solidarity and awareness of Muslim suffering, with a focus on Palestine.[103]

As part of efforts to revamp his country's image, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman aims to take Saudi Arabia back to "moderate Islam"[104]—a narrative of which many observers are skeptical—and created the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition, a group of Sunni countries dedicated to protecting the image of Islam from extremism.[105]

Given Saudi Arabia's political leanings, this religious narrative excludes Shiites, as well as the Muslim Brotherhood and other political Islam proponents who do not toe the Saudi line. Again, it is unclear how much of this religious rallying is focused on combating extremism, and how much is purely targeting Iran.[106]

Assessment

As with other actors in the Arab media space, Arab government actors face a challenge in competing with the sheer volume of content and narratives at audiences' disposal. In addition, these governments have not yet clearly articulated a coherent and forward-looking counternarrative. In a recent op-ed, for instance, Saudi Ambassador to the United States Prince Khalid bin Salman compares and contrasts Saudi and Iranian visions for the region, writing that "the real conflict at the heart of the Middle East" is rooted in competing visions for the future.[107] Beyond technocratic policy fixes, overdue domestic reforms, and eradicating Iranian influence, however, it is not clear what exactly Saudi Arabia envisions for the future of the region. Perhaps more importantly, some of its current policies appear to undercut its rhetoric, undermining its credibility as a messenger.[108]

Saudi Arabia and the UAE's role in several conflicts across the Middle East present a challenge for their public diplomacy in the region. The Saudi-led coalition's aerial and ground campaign in Yemen has exacerbated the country's humanitarian catastrophe, while news reports have alleged UAE-run clandestine prisons and torture.[109] Saudi Arabia and the UAE have also been criticized by Arab publics for yielding the Palestinian cause to Iran and Israel, a point that the Iranian government continues to amplify in its own public diplomacy.[110] The Arab Gulf countries' perceived stance on the Palestine issue places into question their pan-Arab and Islamic unity narratives and undermines their credibility to speak on behalf of Arabs and Muslims alike. The pan-Arab narrative was dealt a heavy blow with the Saudi-led blockade against Qatar, a decision that exposed long-standing fissures within the Gulf Cooperation Council, complicating the effort to present a narrative of Arab unity in the face of threats from Iran.[111]

Even Saudi Arabia's religious narrative, which is part and parcel of the country's identity and public diplomacy, has not been immune to the country's policies. Saudi Arabia's 2016 execution of Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, a prominent Shiite cleric in the country's oil-rich Eastern Province who had long called for greater rights and economic opportunity for the religious minority, alongside 46 others—most of whom were accused of being al-Qaida members—further heightened tensions between the country and its Shiite populations. The executions also sparked protests in Bahrain, Lebanon, and Yemen.[112] In Tehran, protesters stormed the Saudi Embassy, and the events escalated into a rupture of diplomatic ties between Iran and Saudi Arabia.[113]

Nimr's execution called further attention to the plight of Shiites in Saudi Arabia and the exclusionary nature of the country's pan-Islamic narrative.[114] Saudi's religious messaging also faces competition from other states such as Turkey and terrorist groups such as al-Qaida and the Islamic State.

U.S. public diplomacy and narratives in the Middle East

Dozens, if not hundreds, of papers have been written about U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East, its successes, and—more often than not—its failures. This report evaluates U.S.-government-led public diplomacy and messaging in the region specifically compared with that of Iran-directed efforts in order to identify blind spots in the U.S. approach and how best to strengthen it. While Iran has invested in sustaining a long-term, consistent narrative in the region, the United States has not produced any obvious, coherent counternarrative, and more critically, it has no apparent comprehensive strategy to directly counter Iranian disinformation about the United States in key parts of the Arab world.[115]

Public diplomacy structure and activities

The asset most frequently associated with American public diplomacy in the Arab world is arguably Alhurra. Launched in 2004, Alhurra, the U.S.-based, Arabic-language satellite TV channel, is operated under the Middle East Broadcasting Networks (MBN) of the independent U.S. government agency Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), which was recently rebranded as the U.S. Agency for Global Media (USAGM).[116] Since its launch, Alhurra has faced several reputational hurdles, including unsophisticated programming, executives who lacked television experience and Arabic skills, and embarrassing blunders such as the decision to air an hour-long speech by Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah without providing any commentary.[117] Criticism of Alhurra includes accusations of it being an American government mouthpiece, as well as being considered a weak competitor in the crowded Arab media space and relying on the assumption that it could mold Arab attitudes overnight.[118]

Today, some 13 years later, Alhurra has yet to earn the credibility as an independent, objective news source that it once sought. New MBN President Alberto Fernandez took office last summer and hopes to help the channel turn a new leaf and make it relevant in the Arab world.[119] Although it is still too early to determine the impact of MBN's changes under Fernandez, some of his ideas have already been implemented,

including an online op-ed section, "From a Different Angle," that features commentary from journalists, human rights advocates, and intellectuals from the Middle East and the United States.[120] Columnists featured on the site represent the progressive, liberal, secular end of the ideological spectrum. News features and documentaries highlight topics from satirists who use humor to fight extremism, as well as stories of Arab women struggling to break social norms.[121] A new show co-hosted by scholar Samuel Tadros and human rights activist Ammar Abdulhamid aims to cover political and social topics in the Middle East from a classic liberal perspective, and it recently aired an episode countering misperceptions about the Holocaust in the Arab world.[122] While MBN purports to be an objective source of news and information, its content has a visible bias, and despite its quasi-independent status, it is still largely seen as a U.S. government platform by most Arab audiences.[123]

In the past, U.S. public diplomacy has also relied on pan-Arab radio broadcasts to target Arab publics. With the exception of Radio Sawa in Iraq, which MBN views as an important tool for countering anti-American Iranian disinformation in the country, all radio programming will be eliminated in fiscal year 2019 in favor of digital platforms.[124] Online platforms allow the U.S. government to not only target audiences in the region but also—and more importantly—to engage them in discussion. In 2015, for example, MBN designed a digital campaign in Iraq, "Raise Your Voice," to provide people with a platform to express their views on the fight against extremism and its root causes, while amplifying moderate voices.[125] In January 2019, MBN also plans to unveil new, re-energized social media campaigns targeted at 17- to 29-year-old Arabs that will engage them on social, political, and cultural issues, including how to address violent extremism.[126]

In addition to the USAGM's work, the U.S. public diplomacy structure includes several agencies dedicated to messaging and programming that tell the American story. The central umbrella for overall U.S. government strategy is the Office of the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, which is currently run by Heather Nauert as acting undersecretary. Under the sprawling office, the Bureau of Public Affairs aims to inform foreign audiences about U.S. foreign policy and values.[127] The bureau furthers its mission in several ways, including strategic communications; press briefings for press corps at home and abroad; managing the State Department's online assets; and among other initiatives, overseeing six Regional Media Hubs, which are home to foreign-language spokespeople who engage audiences abroad through global and regional outlets and provide a platform for U.S. officials to amplify high-priority policy messages.[128]

The State Department's foreign-language Twitter feeds, such as @USAbilAraby, and other social media platforms focused on expanding the reach of U.S. foreign policy, are managed under the Office of Digital Engagement (ODE).[129] Also under the State Department, the Global Engagement Center is specifically tasked with countering "propaganda and disinformation from international terrorist organizations and foreign countries."[130] Under the current administration, the Global Engagement Center's focus has primarily been on Russia, but there are plans to possibly scrutinize Iranian disinformation and propaganda as well.[131]

U.S. public diplomacy is also known for its substantive, largely successful citizen exchange programs, notably the Fulbright Scholar Program and the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP).[132] These programs facilitate people-to-people exchanges by sending American students, teachers, and professionals to study, research, and visit abroad and bringing their foreign counterparts to the United States to do the same. The IVLP is one of the few U.S.-government funded initiatives of its kind that allows the United States to reach beyond English-speaking elite, as interpretation services are provided for much of the program.[133] Exchanges are a crucial component of U.S. public diplomacy and bolstering American influence overseas because they provide foreign publics with what is often their first in-person encounter with America and Americans. Currently, the Fulbright Program faces a possible 71 percent budget cut for FY 2019. If it fails to receive the funds necessary to implement its program, U.S. public diplomacy will be severely affected.[134]

Various U.S. embassies in the Arab world also house information spaces, more commonly known as American Corners or American Spaces. Located in universities, libraries, and other institutions, these centers provide a space for locals to learn more about the United States through programs and lectures, printed materials, and movies.[135] The spaces also offer English-language learning opportunities; academic advising for those who wish to pursue studies in the United States; and workshops on entrepreneurship, leadership, and other skills.[136] Cultural diplomacy programs are designed to fulfill U.S. foreign policy objectives, which include a large focus on countering violent extremism among youth.[137]

In FY 2016, the largest U.S. public diplomacy programs were in Iraq ($12.6 million), Israel ($4.7 million), and the Palestinian territories ($4 million).[138]

Main narratives of U.S. public diplomacy

Shared values

Signature American values include democracy, equality, openness, freedom, and human rights, which are shared by large numbers of the Arab public. Surveys continue to show that it is not American values that Arab publics take issue with but rather the unpopularity of U.S. policies that hurt America's outreach.[139] As such, inconsistent U.S. policies and perceived double standards undermine any narrative that is weaved around values.[140] The persistent gap between American values-based narratives and policies on the ground weakens the impact of U.S. public diplomacy in the region and adds credibility to Iran's anti-imperialist, anti-American narrative. Moreover, the values-based narrative has been gradually watered down over the years—and virtually discarded under the Trump administration.[141]

U.S. policies

A central goal of U.S. public diplomacy messaging and activities in the Middle East is to explain and further U.S. policy in the region. Policy priorities include countering violent extremist groups; supporting reforms, including an open and free media and fostering the rule of law; strengthening civil society; and ensuring the long-term security of Israel.[142] A series of controversial U.S. policy shifts under President Trump—including the U.S. Embassy's move to Jerusalem, the travel ban largely affecting Muslim-majority countries, and cutting aid to Palestinians—has complicated U.S. public diplomacy practitioners' ability to explain American policies. Moreover, President Trump's no-strings-attached personal alliances with autocratic regimes in the region implicate the United States in Arab citizens' grievances against their leaders, and the president's vilification of Muslims has tarnished U.S. credibility among Arab publics.[143]

The American model

U.S. public diplomacy in the region has not taken full advantage of its comparative advantage, specifically the American model of education, science and technology, and innovation. Many anecdotes point to Arab populations disliking U.S. policies but maintaining positive views of the American model.[144] This narrative can be advanced through joint university cooperation and exchange programs that bring Arabs to the United States and Americans to the Middle East; increased support for cultural centers, information centers, and libraries in the region that tell the U.S. story to local populations through various platforms; and intercultural dialogue focused on areas of mutual interest such as entrepreneurship, health care, and civic engagement.[145] While current U.S. public diplomacy in the region uses this narrative to an extent, it is often overshadowed by CVE language.

Assessment

Currently, the most visible aspect of U.S.-government-led public diplomacy in the region is Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's efforts, which are largely targeted at Iranian publics—using social media posts, speeches, and plans to launch a new 24/7 Farsi-language TV channel—and aimed at supporting anti-regime unrest and combating inaccurate portrayals of America in Iran.[146] Both through his official Twitter account and the State Department's Farsi-language Twitter account, Secretary Pompeo has also made Iranian female activists a focal point of his engagement. Skeptics of this strategy point to the Trump administration's own questionable record of supporting women's rights in the United States and argue that by taking up the cause of Iranian women, America is fueling the Iranian regime's concerns that it is fomenting unrest in the country.[147] This outreach to Iranian publics may be a useful indicator of how the administration could execute similar engagement with Arab audiences.

Under the Obama administration, outreach to Arab and Muslim publics was a key priority, best represented by the Cairo speech.[148] In his 2009 address, titled "A New Beginning," then-President Barack Obama sought to reach out to Muslims around the world and establish a dialogue of mutual interests and priorities.[149] This effort came during a period in which suspicion of the United States was high, following the Bush administration's unpopular policies in the Middle East. While the speech has been critiqued for unnecessarily raising Arab expectations and failing to follow up on promises made, its symbolic importance—from its painstakingly chosen words and level of humility to the persona of Obama himself—raised the bar for the power and potential of U.S. public diplomacy. Importantly, the speech reflected the limits of U.S. public diplomacy and tempered any expectation that a single president could enhance American influence.

What the United States is currently faced with, however, is the opposite side of that coin: the potential of a single president to completely shatter American influence in the Arab world. Any advances that U.S. public diplomacy may have made in engaging with Arab and Muslim publics are threatened by President Trump's rhetoric and actions—both at home and overseas—and have made the task of U.S. public diplomacy practitioners immeasurably more difficult. Before, during, and after his presidential campaign, Trump has demonized Muslims on multiple occasions, including: calling for surveillance of Muslims and mosques; claiming that U.S. Muslims celebrated the September 11 attacks; and issuing an executive order banning travel to the United States from several Muslim-majority countries.[150] Within months of celebrating the U.S. Embassy move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the Trump administration further alienated Arab and Muslim publics by cutting more than $200 million in U.S. aid to Palestinians.[151] These actions not only damage the U.S. reputation among Arab publics, but they also directly affect U.S. national security.[152]

Current U.S. domestic politics do not do much to enhance America's image abroad, and they undermine any values-based narratives it projects. The United States is traditionally known and respected for enshrining freedom of the press and freedom of expression, but President Trump regularly attacks American media outlets, dismissing coverage he disagrees with as "fake news" and antagonizing the news media as an "enemy of the American people."[153] While U.S. history is rooted in embracing diversity, tolerance, and pluralism, President Trump uses incendiary language to describe immigrants and foreigners, invariably calling them "drug dealers, criminals, rapists," and "animals," and paints African, Caribbean, and Central American countries as "shitholes."[154] Setting aside the fact that this language is not befitting of an American leader, President Trump's rhetoric and policies deeply tarnish the United States' reputation in the Middle East and provide U.S. adversaries with more fodder to prop up their anti-American narratives.

Furthermore, the U.S. government—taking a cue from its Arab Gulf allies—has taken to painting Iran as the region's only bogeyman without addressing other Arab public concerns, such as disillusionment with their own governments; persisting frustration with living conditions and unemployment; and the U.S. role in destabilizing the region, including during the 2003 Iraq War. The risk in adopting an exclusive focus on Iran may limit America's ability to address very real concerns of Arab audiences in the region and complicates any attempts to start a conversation or initiate any kind of durable engagement. Furthermore, discourse that criticizes Iranian policy, including its human rights abuses and corruption, without setting the same standard for U.S. allies in the region is likely to be perceived by some as sectarian and hypocritical.

Despite a bleak landscape, it would not serve the United States' best interests in the Middle East to disengage from the region. The United States still has a positive narrative to tell, and ironically, one that could play well to Arab ears, if developed properly and executed with humility. Crafting a narrative around American fallibility in all of its complexity, while highlighting the resilience of American institutions—including democracy and the rule of law—could resonate with Arab publics as they grapple with similar themes. These themes would bolster the narrative of the American model as one that is imperfect but consistently striving to improve.

Recommendations for U.S. policymakers

It is important to note that the Trump administration does not appear to be poised to make public diplomacy outreach to Arab publics a priority. Publics in the region should not anticipate that the current administration will shift its policies in the region to address their primary concerns, including unemployment, poverty, and government corruption.[155] Policy under President Trump has positioned the United States to pick sides in sectarian divides and has placed a premium on ruling elites rather than public attitudes in the Arab world. Should the United States choose to remain engaged in the region on constructive, mutually beneficial grounds, this report recommends the U.S. government do the following:

- **Designate a full-time undersecretary for public diplomacy and public affairs to oversee all U.S. engagement with foreign publics.** Appointing an official undersecretary to this office is the first step for the U.S. government to underline the importance it places on public diplomacy and engagement with foreign publics. The individual who is designated to this role should be tasked with a clear mission—using public diplomacy to support U.S. foreign policy interests—and be competent and uncontroversial, as well as have the requisite background and experience for the task. Currently, this role is occupied by Heather Nauert as acting undersecretary.

- **Create an interagency team as part of the Iran Action Group focused on competing with Iranian public diplomacy in the Middle East and countering anti-American narratives.** This team would enhance existing U.S. public diplomacy programming and narratives in the Middle East to directly compete with those of Iran. If there is no will from the White House to do so, Congress should hold a hearing to analyze the propagation of Iranian disinformation targeted at the United States in the Middle East.

- **Develop a U.S. metanarrative that puts mutual American and Arab interests—including education, economic prosperity, respect for human rights, and shared values of pluralism and tolerance—at its core foundation.** U.S. public diplomacy in the Middle East should focus on developing a long-term, forward-looking metanarrative that is founded on an affirmative vision for the region. Worries about unemployment,

poverty, and other economic issues continue to top the list of Arab publics' most pressing concerns, and these should be the starting point for a U.S.-Arab dialogue.[156] In addition, the United States should hold Iran and its Arab partners to a high standard when it comes to human rights and corruption. If the United States simply criticizes the Iranian regime for its poor record on these accounts while turning a blind eye to some of the same problems within the regimes of some partner countries, it risks being seen as hypocritical and picking sides in regional sectarian fights.

- **Combat Iranian disinformation with factual information.** Efforts to counter Iranian disinformation should refrain from using conspiracy theories and less-than-truthful narratives and focus instead on reliable and factual reporting. Truthful information should be used to counter inaccurate and misleading narratives about the United States and to call attention to issues such as Iran's corruption, violation of human rights, and destabilizing actions in the region. In combating Iranian disinformation, the U.S. government should clearly differentiate between the Iranian government and the Iranian people, and avoid inflammatory rhetoric that vilifies Iranians.

- **Redouble moral and financial support for U.S. public diplomacy practitioners in the Arab world.** Public affairs and public diplomacy officers both in the field and in Washington should be given confidence that their work is important and has the full support of the administration. These individuals know their field and the region best, and their concerns should be supported.

- **Commit to a zero-tolerance policy against Islamophobic and intolerant rhetoric both domestically and abroad.** Currently, Islamophobic rhetoric is institutionalized within the executive office through the president's rhetoric and policies. There should be a top-down effort to combat hateful, incendiary discourse both in the United States and in U.S. foreign policy.

- **Resist sectarian and inflammatory language, and encourage Arab government allies to do the same.** U.S. public diplomacy messaging should subtly show rather than tell audiences the full story in terms of Iran's role in the region without resorting to belligerent language. This approach also avoids any conflation of the Iranian government with the Iranian people. U.S. stakeholders should encourage Gulf Arab partners to refrain from overtly sectarian language in the region. Such language only contributes to sectarian polarization across the region and is inconsistent with achieving U.S. interests.

- **Seize opportunities to de-escalate conflict in Syria and Yemen.** The United States should work with its partners in the region to strive toward inclusive, constructive solutions to ongoing conflicts, including with Syria and Yemen. Undertaking this effort includes continuing to provide humanitarian assistance to refugees and supporting stability in neighboring countries.[157] Such action would address a substantive gap in U.S. policy in the Middle East and highlight the potential of the United States to be a constructive player in the region.[158]

Conclusion

Global approval of U.S. leadership is lower than it was under the two previous American administrations.[159] This is not, however, simply about the United States losing a popularity contest. The decline of the American brand among global publics, including in the Arab world—personified in the leadership of Donald Trump—impedes American influence and presents an obstacle for U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. At the same time, adversaries of the United States, such as Iran, continue to galvanize Arab attitudes against America through inflammatory rhetoric and to counter U.S. influence in the region through public diplomacy—a tool they regard as indispensable to effective statecraft. Iran's public diplomacy apparatus pales in comparison to its behemoth American equivalent, but the relative ineffectiveness of U.S. efforts in this sphere has created a space for Iran to invest both time and patience in crafting narratives and programming that appeal to Arab publics.

The United States has traditionally been focused on outreach to Arab governments and opinion-makers at the expense of Arab publics, and this trend continues under the current administration.[160] The United States has aligned itself with autocratic regimes in the Arab world, extending them a free stamp of approval and diluting the American brand in the process. In comparison, Iran is in the business of targeting and cultivating Arab publics and appealing to their concerns. While changes in U.S. policy in the region would lead to the most expedient, visible impact in shifting Arab attitudes and enhancing American credibility in the Middle East, this amounts to wishful thinking under the Trump administration. In the meantime, U.S.-government public diplomacy stakeholders should pay closer attention—giving an ear, or two—to what Arab publics are thinking in order to determine and develop ways to meet them halfway.

**** Correction, October 3, 2018:*** *This report has been corrected to clarify that Iraq has the second-largest Shiite population in the Middle East.*

About the author

Sarah Alaoui is a Ph.D. student in the Middle East Studies department at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), where her research focuses on Arab public diplomacy. She holds a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of California, San Diego, and a master's degree in public policy from Sciences Po.

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