Engaging the Arab World through Social Diplomacy

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October 2011

NETHERLANDS INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
'CLINGENDAEL'

Language editing by Rebecca Solheim
Desktop publishing by Ragnhild Drange

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Introduction

In the midst of the war on terror it became clear that wars cannot be won when public opinion is lost. 'Public diplomacy' therefore became the catchphrase of Western governments in their aim to win hearts and minds in the Arab and Islamic world. Whereas public diplomacy was heralded as the solution to rebuilding relationships and reinstating trust, it was still underscored by fear of terrorism and the mission to prevent radicalization. As public sentiment towards the Western world continued its steady descent in the Arab world, the need for effective public diplomacy continued to rise. Public diplomacy's apparent failure to turn the tide has therefore become the grateful subject of diplomats, politicians and scholars alike. Osama Bin Laden's death and the Arab Spring that is currently sweeping through the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region provide a rare window of opportunity to reconfigure public diplomacy by ridding it of the terrorism outlook and embracing the idea that it can only be effective when it moves beyond the narrow conception of diplomatic practice.

While the world was still busy trying to answer the question of 'how to connect to the Arab street?', people in the Arab world took to the streets to demand justice, human rights and democracy in the face of oppression. If anything, their actions prove that public diplomacy initiatives did not fail to build mutual understanding, because there was no partner or common ground on the other side. More than ever, now is the time to capitalize on shared principles and invest in fostering relationships in the MENA region that can create win–win situations. In order for this to happen, however, the parameters of public diplomacy need to widen, because experience in the MENA region has proven that Western governments may have a great stake

in its success, but are not always the most suitable actors to practise public diplomacy effectively. Governments need to accept the limitations that arise from the contradiction that diplomacy is naturally aided by secrecy, while public diplomacy is dependent on transparency.

The current debate on public diplomacy is dominated by this dilemma, but has come to a standstill because of focus on the paradigm concerning traditional versus new public diplomacy approaches. In line with Nye's three functions of public diplomacy, *traditional public diplomacy* is broadly understood to comprise: (1) explaining foreign policy; and (2) strategic communication to advance the national interest. The *new public diplomacy*, on the other hand, is concerned with the third dimension: long-term relationship-building with key individuals in foreign populations.[1] This differentiation is highly useful in identifying the dimensions and different ways in which public diplomacy operates. Traditional public diplomacy is clearly closer to more one-sided messaging, and the new public diplomacy is better suited for efforts concerning dialogue and engagement. The emphasis on the growing importance of the new public diplomacy component for success, in the MENA region in particular, has been instrumental in public diplomacy's modern bias towards this side of the scale. Thinking in terms of traditional and new public diplomacy definitely helps us to track the evolution and ever-changing content of the concept, but its added-value diminishes when thinking stops there and the distinction is merely used to disconnect the one from the other.

Winning hearts and minds surely has to be done through genuine dialogue that not only serves the narrow national interest of one state. Yet despite acknowledging its need and making some valuable investments, Western governments have proven incapable of effectively applying this new public diplomacy approach. This is because while trading in traditional public diplomacy for new public diplomacy is certainly tempting, it is also as irrational as it is impossible. In reality, governments' new public diplomacy incorporates the old, because they are indissolubly two sides of the same coin. Governments naturally engage with foreign populations on all three dimensions of the public diplomacy spectrum, because they need all three to serve their national interest best. This underlying motive does have the downside that it can easily undermine the legitimacy of public diplomacy efforts, especially in the MENA region where the intentions of Western governments are perceived within the row of endless double standards that have been applied to people in the region.

Public diplomacy's way forward to rekindle relationships with people in the MENA region now that the winds of change are blowing therefore does not lie in limiting the discussion to ways in which governments can pursue the

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1)   Joseph S. Nye Jr (2004), *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs), pp. 109–110.

new public diplomacy, but rather in accepting the limitations of governments in diplomatic practice and looking for ways to break new ground by moving beyond its strict conception. Diplomats had, and have, little room to manoeuvre in the MENA region: bilateral state relations take precedence over public diplomacy; they are agents who have to prioritize state interests; and they face strict regulations from both their own government and that of their duty station.

Meanwhile, new actors, most notably civil society, have already emerged on the scene and have proven much more effective in fostering relationships, containing crises and improving mutual understanding. Regardless of the debate about whether that can still be called public diplomacy, new public diplomacy or public diplomacy by any other name, it is the incorporation of these non-state actors in some shape or form that can make effective public diplomacy.

These non-state actors are proving more effective because they are part and parcel of fundamental changes in public diplomacy; changes in *who* and *why*. Public diplomacy no longer exclusively remains the realm of the diplomat, and for it to be legitimate and effective it has to serve a broader purpose than narrow national interests. As such, the most effective public diplomacy is simultaneously moving beyond the diplomat and beyond the national interest. This evolution has been most obvious in the Arab world, where Western governments need public diplomacy the most, but find it hardest to pursue. It is time for governments to acknowledge their limitations, and this includes knowing when it serves your interest best to step out of the limelight and take a more arm's length approach. We occasionally find ourselves in a situation where more space is opening up for public diplomacy approaches in some parts of the MENA region, whereas in others the struggle for freedom and democracy is harshly clamped down. More than ever, it is necessary to reach out to the people of the region instead of the regimes; it is time to face changing times and move towards a more hybrid public diplomacy practice.

This paper aims to contribute to this goal by addressing the challenges and opportunities that public diplomacy has and will face in the MENA region. In order to make better use of the fundamental changes in public diplomacy's capacity to improve relationships with people in the MENA region, it is crucial to customize activity to the specific context, while taking its global reach into account. This paper takes the first steps in this customization by exploring the public diplomacy concept from its theoretical refinements to the practical impossibilities that impair its translation into practice.

In order to make this analysis, the first part of the paper delves into the fundamentals of the public diplomacy concept and the workings of soft power and socialization. The second part maps out the specifics of the fundamental shifts in public diplomacy in an exploration of why the concept has moved beyond the diplomat and the national interest, and what this means. The

third part of the paper focuses on the challenge of translating the sketched theoretical underpinnings and implications into an approach that is able to meet practical demands. The ideas of other scholars and the lessons learnt from Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs) are used to explore practical network formats wherein state and non-state actors can fulfil mutually reinforcing roles in a public diplomacy approach. In the fourth part, this hybrid public diplomacy model is customized to the MENA region. It shows that actor-, context- and country-specific constraints demand the customization of any public diplomacy approach. Because of the ongoing changes in the MENA region and its unforeseen future, this exercise is particularly troublesome, but all the more important in exemplifying that constant tweaking, adjusting and tailoring are necessary. After sketching the MENA context and its challenges and opportunities, particularly daunting dilemmas that are especially relevant today—such as how to deal with Islamists and quangos—are addressed, before discussing what a customized public diplomacy approach can and cannot do. After all, acknowledging and accepting its limitations are some of the most important challenges for public diplomacy and the actors who attempt to practise it.

The MENA region is changing as of writing, and public diplomacy should do the same in order to adapt. This paper therefore aims to pull the current debate on public diplomacy out of its comfort zone and to place it right at the heart of the changes that it is facing in practice.

1. Power and the Evolution of Public Diplomacy

The Failure of Exercising Soft Power through (New) Public Diplomacy

The events of the new millennium's first decade made it painstakingly clear for the West how crucial it is to engage with foreign publics in the Arab and Muslim world in order to create goodwill and to foster relationships. The events of 9/11 and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq sparked growing awareness of the importance of a country's external reputation. As a result, public diplomacy moved away from the sidelines and shifted to the core of diplomatic activity. Rather than being a diplomat's additional task to 'reach out to the population', winning hearts and minds became an important and visible component in diplomatic activities ranging from nation-branding to development aid.

Public diplomacy has been described by Paul Sharp as 'the process by which direct relations with people in a country are pursued to advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented'.[2] An even broader definition has been provided by Nicholas Cull, who termed public diplomacy an 'international actor's attempt to manage the international environment

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2)   Paul Sharp (2005), 'Revolutionary States, Outlaw Regimes and the Techniques of Public Diplomacy', in Jan Melissen (ed.), *The New Public Diplomacy* (London: Palgrave), p. 83.

through engagement with a foreign public'.[3] Under the umbrella of these definitions, the concept has evolved greatly in both theory and practice; so greatly that the public diplomacy label has been simultaneously evolving and eroding as it is pasted on an ever-widening range of activities that consist of some form of diplomatic engagement with foreign publics.

While the concept of public diplomacy changed in importance, shape and form along with the demands of diplomatic practice and new communication technologies, it simultaneously became more omnipresent and, as a consequence, harder to define. After all, US President Obama's famous Cairo speech in June 2009 calling for a new beginning with Muslims around the world, the extensive exchange programmes with people from the region that are organized by the American National Council for International Visitors, and USAID's efforts in establishing partnerships in development cooperation can all be listed as comprising one part or another of public diplomacy. The public diplomacy concept has become so elusive because it is no longer a distinct tier of diplomacy. Nowadays it can best be seen as the component of diplomatic practice that specifically nourishes and invests in the relationship with a foreign public.

One of the most influential frameworks in shaping ideas concerning the use of public diplomacy is the 'soft power paradigm'. According to Nye, power is the ability of actors to get others to do what one wants. This ability stems from either hard or soft power. Whereas hard power uses carrots and sticks—that is, payment or coercion—soft power draws on attraction to shape the preferences of others to obtain one's preferred outcomes. In Nye's famous words, soft power is 'the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment'.[4] This 'attraction', in turn, can mainly be derived from a country's culture, its values and its policies. According to this perspective, public diplomacy is a tool to wield soft power because it can use soft power resources in engaging with foreign publics in order to shape their preferences and attract them to certain goals and policies.[5]

It is therefore unsurprising that public diplomacy came to represent the heralded solution to winning the war on terror through attracting Arab and Islamic populations to Western values, society and policies. But as much as 9/11 and its aftermath revealed the need for public diplomacy, the failure of the Bush administration's approach revealed that the narrow use of soft power through public diplomacy can actually decrease an actor's attractiveness and

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3) Nicholas J. Cull (2009), 'Public Diplomacy: Lessons from the Past', *CPD Perspectives on Public Diplomacy*, p. 12.

4) Joseph S. Nye Jr (2008), 'Public Diplomacy and Soft Power', *Annals of the American Academy of Social and Political Science,* 616, March, pp. 94–109 at p. 94.

5) Nye, *Soft Power*; and Joseph S. Nye (2009), 'Get Smart: Combining Hard and Soft Power', *Foreign Affairs* July/August, pp. 160–161.

consequently diminish, instead of increase, its soft power base.[6] Approaching a foreign public with the goal of directly shaping its preferences to align with what best serves your interests is in many cases more likely to cause resistance than attraction.

In the case of the Bush administration, one-sided messaging about the universal values of human rights and democracy did not sit well with a critical public that saw the paradox in a US government that was supposedly pursuing democracy yet was promoting wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, while simultaneously being a loyal supporter of the region's long-term authoritarian regimes and denying democratically elected parties their share of power, most notably in the 2006 election of Hamas in Gaza—not to mention numerous other controversial issues, such as the United States' refusal to participate in the International Criminal Court, human rights violations in prisoners' treatment in Guantanamo Bay, and the seemingly unrelenting support for Israel whether Israel breaks international laws or not. So when a public diplomacy approach like Bush's lacks mutuality, and fails to take content, context and the actual foreign public that it aims to engage into account, it can easily become counter-productive and actually decrease the attractiveness of the actor in the process. This is exactly what happened with the United States' one-sided public diplomacy strategies that were launched to win Arab and Muslim populations' support.

In these cases, possibly well-intended public diplomacy strategies run the danger of being tainted by the negative impressions that cling to suspicions of propaganda and manipulation. This happened, for example, to the US government-launched *Al Hurra* television station and *Hi* magazine. The million-dollar initiatives were meant to connect with Arab and Muslim populations through popular mediums to promote better understanding of, and ultimately attraction to, 'American values'. Both, however, failed to attract their intended audiences, as they were perceived as merely pushing the US agenda and disregarding dissenting voices in an already crowded and professional Arab media environment.[7]

The fear of propaganda understandably haunts any discussion and exercise of public diplomacy, as a thin line admittedly runs between the two. There is no denying that public diplomacy owes much to propaganda and the spotlight that it placed on the need to consider and influence the opinion of foreign publics. While the two often go hand in hand in national strategies to some extent, Jan Melissen argues that the fundamental difference lies in the

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6) Cull, 'Public Diplomacy', p. 15.

7) Marwan M. Kraidy (2008), 'Arab Media and US Policy: A Public Diplomacy Reset', Policy Analysis Brief, the Stanley Foundation, pp. 6–7;, *Battles to Bridges: US Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy after 9/11* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 33–34.

pattern of communication that is used for persuasion.[8] Public diplomacy's most distinctive feature from propaganda is the fact that it is not attempting, or even able, to coerce. A foreign public is not a controllable target, but free to judge and conclude whether partially or completely to accept or reject public diplomacy efforts.[9] In order to be successful, sound public diplomacy therefore has to mitigate any suspicions of propaganda by communicating truthfully, while respecting freedom of opinion and the critical voices of the foreign public that it aims to engage.

The failure of public diplomacy to function as a state-centred soft-power tool that can directly affect the goodwill of foreign populations led to reconsiderations of the subject, given the continued urgency of the subject matter for the West in the Arab and Islamic world. On the one hand, soft power scholars re-emphasized public diplomacy's need by calls to improve the marriage between hard and soft power in a *smart* power strategy based on contextual intelligence.[10] The argument goes that skilful combination can balance the two power bases by decreasing reliance on and the costs of hard power and help to foster cooperation to win hearts and minds.[11] In this new conception of smart power, the CSIS Commission headed by Richard Armitage and Joseph Nye rightfully points out that a comprehensive smart power strategy can greatly enhance reputations when the pursued policies are perceived as credible and legitimate.[12] Credibility can be enhanced or decreased by the perceived intent with which an actor aims to apply soft power through public diplomacy. When the objective is no longer limited to narrow national (security) interests, but includes the interest of the foreign public, public diplomacy efforts are likely to become more legitimate and effective. In other words, it should service mutual interests, or at least create a situation where both the government and the foreign public gain some form of profit.

Meanwhile, public diplomacy scholars were also reconfiguring the concept of public diplomacy and presented the *new* public diplomacy. According to the new public diplomacy, diplomats ideally enter into a dialogue with foreign publics where it is just as important to listen as it is to be heard.[13] This new understanding of public diplomacy moved away from

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8) Jan Melissen (2005), 'Wielding Soft Power: The New Public Diplomacy', *Clingendael Diplomacy Papers*, no. 2, pp. 19–22.

9) Zaharna, *Battles to Bridges*, p. 143.

10) Nye, 'Get Smart', defines contextual intelligence as 'the intuitive diagnostic skill that helps policymakers align tactics with objectives to create smart strategies' (p. 161).

11) Richard L. Armitage and Joseph S. Nye (co-chairs) (2007), *CSIS Commission on Smart Power: A Smarter, More Secure America* (Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies).

12) Armitage and Nye, *CSIS Commission on Smart Power*, p. 13.

13) Jan Melissen, 'Wielding Soft Power', pp. 19–22.

the old usage of public diplomacy as a sole top–down practice of state-centred communication with a foreign public, aimed at managing the international environment, promoting national interests and advancing foreign policy goals.[14] After all, applying this old-style public diplomacy in the Arab and Islamic world had clearly underestimated the critical public that it aimed to persuade; indeed, bypassing it completely, merely sending information and launching projects without listening to actual needs or addressing grievances.

The framework of the so-called new public diplomacy instead stresses that actors operate in the fluidity of the globalized network environment, in which it has become necessary to engage with foreign publics through two-way communication that is aimed at fostering *mutual* understanding.[15] The new public diplomacy is about working with publics, not just informing them. It is more often about establishing long-term relationships that will build trust than about quickly resolving policy problems.

This new public diplomacy by no means reduces the importance of old-style public diplomacy. One-way messaging and nation-branding, for example, are still highly beneficial for the goal of image-building and enhancing economic relations. The new public diplomacy in its own right is better suited for building long-term relationships that can cushion shorter-term crises. The evolution of different types of public diplomacy can thus be distinguished and the emphasis should not be put on their rivalry but on how these different types co-exist and strengthen one another. The realization that different forms of public diplomacy are appropriate for different goals and settings should underlie the entire study of diplomacy. Monologue, dialogue and collaboration therefore all have an important role to play in the public sphere of the networked society.[16] This means that state-centric and multi-centric diplomacy are developing alongside and interacting with each other, creating official and non-official diplomatic intersections in the process.[17]

The reconfigured concepts of smart power and the new public diplomacy are notable developments, as exemplified by the leading roles that they both play in the Obama administration's strategy to reconnect with people in the Middle East. But despite these developments, the new public diplomacy did not provide an ultimate solution for winning over sentiment in the MENA

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14) Cull, 'Public Diplomacy', p. 14.

15) Melissen (ed.), *The New Public Diplomacy*.

16) Geoffrey Cowan and Amelia Arsenault (2008), 'Moving from Monologue to Dialogue to Collaboration: The Three Layers of Public Diplomacy', in Geoffrey Cowan and Nicholas J. Cull (eds), *Public Diplomacy in a Changing World*, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (Thousand Oaks CA: Sage), pp. 10–30; and Manuel Castells (2008), 'The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance', in Cowan and Cull (eds), *Public Diplomacy in a Changing World*, pp. 78–93, at p. 78.

17) Brian Hocking (1999), 'Catalytic Diplomacy: Beyond "Newness" and "Decline"', in Jan Melissen (ed.), Innovation in Diplomatic Practice (London: Macmillan), pp. 25–26.

region. This is because while the separation lines between the old and new public diplomacy have proved useful, in reality the two go together. The new has not substituted the old, but the old has incorporated the new. There is nothing surprising about this, because states always pursue public diplomacy with their own interests at heart. All three functions of public diplomacy thus remain important: informing foreign publics of policy decisions; strategic communication; and building key long-term relationships. New public diplomacy is mainly associated with the latter, but states need a comprehensive approach to safeguard their interests. In order to move forward, the current debate on public diplomacy should therefore not merely propagate the new public diplomacy alone, but address the tension and troubles that governments face in their attempts to apply comprehensive public diplomacy effectively.

Whereas it is advantageous that varying forms of public diplomacy suit different goals and situations, in a comprehensive approach this actually puts governments in a tricky position. The two sides of the public diplomacy coin can at times appear to be a Jekyll-and-Hyde-like combination, wherein one undercuts the other. Notorious in this regard is that the one-sided pushing of apparent state interests can undercut the legitimacy of parallel two-sided relationship-building. We have seen this over and over again with the double agendas of Western public diplomacy in the MENA region. In order for a comprehensive public diplomacy strategy to work, governments have to make changes in the ways in which they are currently applying public diplomacy.

These changes should start by readdressing the underpinnings of the actual workings of public diplomacy. The understanding of the soft-power mechanism that forms the core of public diplomacy needs to change in order to use attraction more effectively in any public diplomacy strategy.

Social Power through Socialization

The oldest form of public diplomacy can best be understood as the direct application of soft power by states to attract a foreign public 'through the interactions of specific actors by mechanisms of "persuasion"'.[18] However, the later-evolved forms of public diplomacy focus on an entirely different aspect in the causal mechanism of soft-power projection, which departs from the assumption that attraction can only take place, and soft power can only be exercised, if there is some *susceptibility* in a foreign public. In the words of Alan Henrikson:

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18) Yong-Wook Lee (2011), 'Soft Power as Productive Power', in Sook-Jong Lee and Jan Melissen (eds), *Public Diplomacy and Soft Power in East Asia* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan).

> [...] to assimilate *publicly* conducted diplomacy in particular to 'soft power' would be a conceptual mistake, and far too reductionist; for a diplomacy that is expected to have public appeal and to win favour for a country must rely on the moral, political, and intellectual assent of the populations addressed by it.[19]

Any actor who engages in public diplomacy does so in order to gain or maintain a foreign public's favour, thereby to create greater opportunities to serve national policy goals directly or indirectly. The nature of these goals are always selfish but can still be perceived as selfless. Safeguarding economic interests, for example, easily appears as direct selfishness, while safeguarding the international rule of law is of a more indirect amiable form, even though it indirectly and selfishly serves the safety and security of one state as much as those of others. The fact that the latter serves a national as well as a broader interest, and can more easily be pursued in a multilateral fashion, renders it greater legitimacy in the eyes of a foreign public. With a more legitimate perception of the intentions of an actor's public diplomacy strategies, foreign publics become more susceptible to actively engaging in such a strategy.

The most powerful, ideal and cheap way to get others to do what you want is—unsurprisingly—when they actually come to want what you want. The best way to attain this for the long term is not through an aggressive public diplomacy strategy that attempts actively to change preferences in line with direct interests, as already discussed over the Bush administration's attempts in the Middle East, but when actors come to value certain norms and ideas voluntarily. Yong-Wook Lee calls this the *socialization* process that necessarily precedes persuasion: 'the act of having others accept new ideas or norms for their legitimate quality'.[20] Socialization is therefore a necessary step between the causation of the sources of attraction and actual attraction or persuasion. It is the essential step to allow for the eventual conversion of the use of soft-power resources into a foreign public's behavioural outcomes.[21]

Public diplomacy should focus on fostering this socialization process rather than on aiming to achieve instant behavioural outcomes. The socialization process aims to create space for dialogue, an exchange of values and ideals, and the possibility of their transformation. It is worth the investment, as it serves to enhance an actor's soft-power capacities strategically. It provides a great window of opportunity for rebuilding legitimacy and gaining trust, which are ground conditions for the second step

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19) Alan K. Henrikson (2005), 'Niche Diplomacy in the World Public Arena: The Global "Corner" of Canada and Norway', in Jan Melissen (ed.), *The New Public Diplomacy* (London: Palgrave), p. 73.

20) Yong-wook Lee, 'Soft Power as Productive Power'.

21) Joseph S. Nye (2008), 'Foreword', in Wanabe Yasushi and David L. McConnell (eds), *Soft Power Superpowers: Cultural and National Assets of Japan and the United States* (Armonk NY: East Gate Book), preface, p. x.

in the soft-power mechanism: attraction. Instead of garnering direct compulsory power over a foreign public, the possibility of voluntary attraction is created. It thereby focuses on the 'productive power' of diffuse social forces to shape one another by forming and transforming meanings, discourses and experiences.[22] According to Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall, 'the bases and workings of productive power are the socially existing, and, hence, historically contingent and changing understandings, meanings, norms, customs and social identities that make possible, limit, and are drawn on for action'.[23] Public diplomacy strategies should focus on this normative aspect of productive relational soft power, rather than on the possibly counter-productive aspects of trying to apply soft power in which the aim of relative power increases, or gaining direct power over another.

A term that has been used in this regard is social power, a notion that stresses that this particular form of non-coercive power is embedded and shaped by the reciprocal relationships of actors and the complex social context.[24] Dependent on these contextual realities, social power is derived from 'communication, social knowledge, and economic and political interaction'.[25] Social power does not aim to control others or move them in different directions, but focuses on enabling openness to challenge and changing the mutually constitutive relations and contexts so that actors can come to mutual understanding and attraction. Since social power is 'intangible and versatile', it becomes most obvious and measurable when the created attraction between actors leads to joint behavioural outcomes towards a common goal.[26] Merely measuring social power by tangible outcomes, however, does grave injustice to the crucial but indirect impact that fostering mutual understanding through attraction can have towards better relations with foreign publics.

As was mentioned earlier; attraction without compulsion is only possible when a foreign public perceives the engagement as legitimate and is consequently susceptible to it. Ian Hall leaves no doubt about the crucial impact of legitimacy on the practice of diplomacy when he states that 'the institution of diplomacy is, in other words, constantly subject to stress by the very nature of its construction and the fragility of its legitimacy'.[27] Legitimacy is a necessary condition to allow for voluntary rapprochement, because social

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22) Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall (eds) (2005a), *Power in Global Governance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 20.

23) Michael Barnett and Raymond Duvall (2005b), 'Power in International Politics', *International Organization*, 59(1), p. 56.

24) Peter van Ham (2010), *Social Power in International Politics* (London: Routledge), p. 3.

25) Van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics*.

26) Van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics*, p. 5.

27) Ian Hall (2010), 'The Transformation of Diplomacy: Mysteries, Insurgencies and Public Relations', *International Affairs*, 86(1), pp. 247–256, at p. 249.

power's effects cannot be fully controlled by its sender. Because attraction needs to take place in the mind of foreign publics, whether this can and will take place depends considerably on their perception and role in the relationship. As Arab and Islamic publics around the world have already shown, foreign publics are not merely subjects; they judge and interpret the social power application of others, and thereby wield control over its outcome.[28] They, alone, control whether another actor's public diplomacy activities actually attract them enough to alter their preferences, thinking and/or behaviour.

Engagement must therefore be perceived as credible and legitimate in order to attract and activate a foreign public voluntarily. The importance of an actor's legitimacy greatly complicates matters, since the actor itself cannot guarantee this 'quality'; it depends on 'some form of consensus by those whose opinion matters' (that is, the foreign public) as to whether legitimacy is bestowed or not.[29] In reality this means that 'those who determine what is legitimate have social power'.[30] The fact that legitimacy cannot be controlled or guaranteed does not leave actors aiming to engage in socialization powerless in their efforts. Legitimacy, credibility and trust can be earned and improved.

Whereas legitimacy tends to stem from shared values and norms, these are much harder to grasp in situations where mutual mistrust is widening the gap between an actor and a foreign public. This was clearly the case for the United States and many European governments, which struggle with their reputation and relationships in the Arab world because of one-sided communication strategies and unpopular (foreign) policy decisions. But even in the Middle East, where public diplomacy is most pressing and hardest to do, there are opportunities to earn legitimacy for public diplomacy efforts. Opportunities are greatly enhanced, for example, by the current Arab Spring, which is narrowing the gap by exemplifying the common values and mutual interests that people in the MENA region have with the West. In order to grasp this opportunity, five factors are crucial for legitimate engagement through public diplomacy: perceived intent; shared interests; dialogue; space for dissenting voices; and collective ownership.

To gain legitimacy, an actor has to start by talking the talk and walking the walk. Ensuring that intent is not perceived as malicious, however, does not mean that an actor should hide the fact that he is pursuing certain self-interests. After all, self-interest is evident, since there is no other reason to practise public diplomacy than to bring certain objectives closer. Legitimacy, however, lies in which interests are pursued. An actor should therefore pursue

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28) Nye, 'Public Diplomacy and Soft Power', p. xiii.
29) Shane P. Mulligan (2006), 'The Uses of Legitimacy in International Relations', *Millennium – Journal of International Studies*, 34, p. 364.
30) Van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics*, p. 14.

interests that are shared with a foreign public so that there is mutual gain in the engagement, so while engagement through socialization serves a strategic purpose, it is not a zero sum game; it needs to create a win–win situation wherein socialization also works in reverse.

In summary, when faced with a rightfully critical Arab public, Western governments have to do everything in their power to avoid propagandistic connotations to their public diplomacy. This is best undertaken by securing the perception of legitimate intent through the pursuit of national interests, which simultaneously serve a broader shared purpose with the foreign public. The wave of demonstrations for democracy and universal human rights that resulted in the monumental ousting of Ben Ali in Tunisia and Mubarak in Egypt, and continued open demands for freedom across the region in the face of oppression, prove that these shared interests run deep. However, the intent to create a win–win situation on the basis of shared interests alone is not enough.

In order to have longer-term legitimate engagement with a foreign public, this engagement should be dialogical with space for dissenting voices. This means that an actor that aims to engage does not attempt merely to press home its viewpoints and intentions, but that it should be opening up to the socialization process as well. So while an actor attempts to create and increase social power by affecting the preferences of a foreign public, this actor is actually dependent on allowing the simultaneous social-power creation, increase, and projection of a foreign public. Success depends on the mutuality of the process and the actor therefore needs to open up to the possibility of adapting its preferences as well. Collective ownership over this dialogical process is therefore the most ideal way of ensuring the legitimate pursuit of shared interests on the basis of mutuality.[31]

In public diplomacy, the national interest is served not only through dialogue and increased understanding of one's policy, values, ideals and ideology by foreign publics, but also by expanding one's own scope and understanding one's counterparts' behaviour and ideological underpinnings. In the long term, a healthy mutual relationship with a foreign public can lead to greater goodwill, possibilities for effective cooperation in numerous areas, and direct and indirect support for certain policy choices. In times of crises, the created capacity of understanding can help to cushion some of the negative effects that stem from foreign policy choices, or even domestic events with an international impact. With regard to the Arab world, examples that quickly spring to mind are possible future cases that resemble the Danish cartoon crisis and the crisis surrounding the release of Dutch politician Geert Wilder's movie *Fitna*. In such cases, prior legitimate engagement has already laid a foundational relationship that renders foreign publics more susceptible

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31) Van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics*, p. 16.

to interpreting events in a nuanced frame and more invested in searching for common ground to prevent crises.

It is important here to maintain a realistic outlook and to underscore the modest way in which public diplomacy can play a role. Public diplomacy will not overturn negative feelings or responses, despite wishful thinking; as much as it is not a *direct* soft-power tool, it is also not a direct counter-terrorism tool. In a nutshell, public diplomacy should first and foremost focus on creating the possibility of attraction through socialization. The goal remains to affect foreign publics' preferences to suit your interests better, but the focus is on creating susceptibility for attraction rather than seeking direct control. During crisis periods this translates into a possibility to mitigate tensions through the opened space and increased susceptibility for what you do and say. In that sense, legitimate socialization through public diplomacy can grant you the legitimacy that is needed to gain access to key influential figures, but also to foreign publics at large, in order to address controversies and grievances. Mutual understanding then equips a foreign—but also your own—public with a more accurate and legitimate frame to interpret events and developments (both positive and negative). However, increased mutual understanding can only be expected to be accompanied by foreign audiences' greater susceptibility and understanding of a country's domestic developments and foreign policy choices if the time is granted for this understanding to grow on the basis of trust, legitimacy and reciprocity. The strength of public diplomacy therefore lies in mutuality and a long-term scope, because the connections that can cushion the tensions of tomorrow have to be built today.

Effective public diplomacy creates social power through socialization. This adds nuance to the dominant soft power thinking by incorporating the necessity of gaining susceptibility and building trust in a foreign public before attraction—the working of soft power—can take place. This can be a very slow process with a pay-off that is hard to measure and define. Governments that are voted in and out of office, and that are pressured by policy agendas and the need for quick wins, do not always have the patience or the luxury to rely solely on this strategy. Nor do they always have the possibility to follow the five factors of effective socialization: pay attention to the perceived intent of the initiative; pursue shared interests; use dialogue; allow space for dissenting voices; and propose collective ownership of the initiative. Diplomatic reality differs from ideal theoretical concepts, and applying the most effective public diplomacy strategy encompasses more than an about-turn in foundational concepts alone. In acknowledging and accepting the limitations of diplomats, the fundamentals of why and who is practising public diplomacy may have to change alongside the nuanced understanding of the workings of soft power.

2. Moving beyond the Diplomat and the National Interest

The Controversial Shifts of Public Diplomacy: Who and Why?

Public diplomacy's evolution into a comprehensive approach that incorporates both the new and old ways suits the interconnected multi-actor international environment. It therefore thrives in highly interdependent regions and between countries that are linked by multiple transnational relationships, economic and/or political interdependence, and substantial degrees of interconnections between their civil societies.[32] This interconnectedness has allowed public diplomacy no longer to be confined to the nation-state alone. It has proven effective in engaging a wide range of foreign publics in issues concerning collective goods. Examples are the successful campaigns and instrumental contributions of governments, civil society and supranational institutions to bring about the international ban on landmines, the Kimberley process and the International Criminal Court.

However, in any conceptual discussion on public diplomacy these formal and informal cross-sections and the unclear role of governmental, non-governmental and even supranational players make its definition blurry at best. Opposing schools of thought are even developing around the concept. Mark McDowell, for example, states that 'PD takes place in *public*, but for it

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32) Van Ham, *Social Power in International Politics*, pp. 10–11.

to be *diplomacy*, it has to entail a role for the state'.[33] On the other hand, authors such as Manuel Castells argue that 'public diplomacy, as the diplomacy of the public, not the government, intervenes in this global public sphere, laying the ground for traditional forms of diplomacy to act beyond the strict negotiation of power relationships by building on shared cultural meaning, the essence of communication'.[34] There is little agreement on whether one should emphasize the 'public' or the 'diplomacy' components of the concept. As already mentioned, public diplomacy can probably best be understood as the component of diplomatic practice that nourishes and invests in relationships with foreign publics. However, whereas public diplomacy has evolved in a way whereby the old style has incorporated the new, in practice we can distinguish developments that are moving beyond the strict state-centred public diplomacy label.

These developments are instigated by the realization that the real problem of practising legitimate public diplomacy in the MENA region lies within Western governments. In the broad Arab and Islamic world, Western governments have long been caught in a tricky catch-22 wherein they seek stability and security in two contrasting ways: on the one hand through supporting authoritarian regimes that seemed able to maintain stability; and on the other hand, Western governments realized that it was important for safety and security to win hearts and minds by emphasizing shared democratic values and interests in attempts to build healthier relationships with foreign publics. Hence, even when the masses gathered in Cairo's Tahrir Square for eighteen days in a row to demand democracy and the departure of Mubarak, US and European reactions were trapped in this catch-22 and their response remained hesitant and aloof. While Western governments have been caught in their contradictory words and actions, other actors who value increasing mutual understanding, pursuing shared interests and building greater relationships with foreign publics have stepped up to the plate.

The first controversial shift that can be detected therefore lies in *who* practises public diplomacy. According to Nye, a wide range of actors can apply soft power in a wide range of contexts.[35] Whereas public diplomacy is usually associated with some form of state involvement, it is clear that the legitimacy of the type of engagement that the evolved public diplomacy stimulates is enhanced by involving a wide range of actors. Whether governments like it or not, other actors have already entered the scene. The playing field is now occupied by an expanding realm of non-state actors—including civil society, NGOs, faith-based organizations and multinational

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33) Mark McDowell (2008), 'Public Diplomacy at the Crossroads: Definitions and Challenges in an "Open Source" Era', *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, vol. 32(2) Special Edition, p. 8.

34) Castells, 'The New Public Sphere', p. 78.

35) Nye, 'Public Diplomacy and Soft Power'.

corporations that are active in investing in reciprocal relationships with foreign publics.[36] Whereas it is unsurprising that non-state actors aim to establish relationships with foreign publics, what is interesting is that civil society organizations (CSOs) increasingly do so in pursuance of typical public diplomacy goals: to establish greater mutual understanding and long-term reciprocal relationships.

Three things can be done theoretically as a result of this shift towards non-state actors: one can include non-state actors as actors that are active in the practice of public diplomacy; defend the claim that diplomatic activity can only be practised by diplomats; or convey a new term for diplomatic practice. Over the years diplomatic theory has already witnessed a mushrooming of terms that emphasize the fact that non-state actors have a role to play in (public) diplomacy, including 'catalytic diplomacy', 'multi-stakeholder diplomacy', 'paradiplomacy', 'track-two diplomacy' and 'citizen diplomacy'.[37] In practice, the Dutch NGO FORUM already proactively applies the term 'social diplomacy' for activities in which it uses its structural relationships with foreign state and non-state actors to increase mutual understanding.[38] It is clear that non-state actors have developed as players who make use of their local and regional long-term networks to increase mutual understanding, cooperation and even damage control when necessary. They are thereby challenging the traditional 'limits' of public diplomacy by creating their own social diplomacy realm.

Many of these new terms describe the changing nature of the important actors in diplomacy, but their simultaneous use adds little clarification to the process. Since we are dealing with an ongoing evolution of the theory and

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36) Cull, 'Public Diplomacy', p. 14; Melissen (ed.), *The New Public Diplomacy*, pp. 5 and 8; and Crocker Snow Jr (2005), 'Definition of Public Diplomacy' (Medford MA: The Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy), available online at http://fletcher.tufts.edu/murrow/pd/definitions.html (visited on 7 January 2010).

37) Hocking, 'Catalytic Diplomacy'; Brian Hocking (2006), 'Multistakeholder Diplomacy: Forms, Functions and Frustrations', in Jovan Kurbalija and Valentin Katrandjiev (eds), *Multistakeholder Diplomacy: Challenges and Opportunities* (Geneva: DiploFoundation); Sherry Lee Mueller (2007), 'The Basics of Citizen Diplomacy', available online at: http://www.coalitionforcitizendiplomacy.org/pdf/basics.pdf (visited January 2010); Brent M. Eastwood (2007), 'A Note on the New Face of Citizen Diplomacy: Education City and American Universities in the Middle East', *American Foreign Policy Interests*, 29, pp. 443–449; and Grazyna Czubek (ed.) (2002), 'Social Diplomacy: The Case of Poland. International Activity of Polish NGOs and their Dialogue with Government' (Warsaw: Stefan Batory Foundation), available online at: http://www.batory.org.pl/doc/diplomac.pdf , p. 3.

38) Sadik Harchaoui (2008), '*Alleen Diplomatieke Levenshouding brengt Vrede*', *De Volkskrant*, 3 June; and R. van Doeveren and I. d'Hooghe (2009), 'Engaging the Arab and Islamic World through Social Diplomacy', research proposal for the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Clingendael/FORUM.

practice of public diplomacy, and for matters of clarity, public diplomacy is distinguished here as a component of national diplomatic practice, and the newly coined 'social diplomacy' refers to the activity that pursues public diplomacy goals but that moves beyond the confined limits of diplomats. Rather than something new and distinctly different, this is merely used to describe an ongoing yet impactful development.

Regardless of the definitional decision made—that is, developing a new term and/or treating current developments as an ongoing process—non-diplomatic actors have a role to fulfil and can, and should, contribute to engaging foreign publics. This can be done both purposefully and unintentionally. However, in order to count as public diplomatic practice, there must be intent on the part of the non-diplomatic actor to pursue public diplomacy goals. Nye has formulated these goals as: daily communication to explain foreign policy decisions; strategic communication involving symbolic events and branding activities to advance specific government policies; and relationship-building with 'key individuals over many years'.[39] For states, these goals all have to be pursued and are naturally linked to serving national interests. CSOs, on the contrary, have the distinct advantage that they can focus on the relationship-building goal without necessarily having ulterior national motives that can undermine their efforts. Their social diplomacy activities can lead to greater benefits because they are perceived as more credible. In addition, they can better follow the five guidelines for successful socialization, because their activities are not blurred or constrained by national policy goals or the inherent limitations of the diplomatic game. Some actors are simply better equipped than others to bestow a sense of legitimacy on the socialization process in which they are engaging with foreign publics, and this has everything to do with the perception of the objective with which they are practising public or social diplomacy.

As a result, the second controversial shift in public diplomacy lies in *why* you practice public diplomacy. When we revisit Paul Sharp's definition, public diplomacy aims to 'advance the interests and extend the values of those being represented'.[40] While this objective has broadly remained the same, in public diplomacy the locus has shifted from merely pursuing the national interest to pursuing a broader objective, one that also serves the foreign public's interest. It is therefore crucial to differentiate between the objectives that different actors have in their application and expansion of soft power, and how these are and/or can be perceived by a foreign public.

First and foremost, diplomats have to safeguard and promote the national interest. This leads them to prioritize the traditional public diplomacy approach, which focuses on the two public diplomacy goals of

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39) Nye, *Soft Power*, pp. 109–110.
40) Sharp, 'Revolutionary States, Outlaw Regimes and the Techniques of Public Diplomacy', p. 83.

explaining policy and using strategic communication, such as branding, to enhance state interests. This approach evidently draws on soft power resources to engage foreign publics in order to serve the national interest. Increasing soft power is valuable, because it increases one's ability to influence another state through its population's attraction to yours. The other side of public diplomacy with regard to the relationship objective is more modest and does not attempt to increase relative soft power *over* another. Its objective is instead to stimulate the socialization process in order to enable an increase in soft power to serve a mutual interest. Such mutual interest could mean finding common ground or action. Either way, it starts with coming to a mutual understanding. This is not always easy for a diplomat to accomplish, since diplomats simultaneously have to pursue the other two public diplomacy goals.

Whereas seeking power over another can lead to a backlash, seeking and sharing power over a process to serve mutual interests is perceived as a more legitimate and welcomed objective. The assumption goes that acting beyond (not against) the narrow national interest for a common good, or shared interest, will indirectly serve a country's national interest better through the goodwill that it creates. The problem for diplomats with practising the entire spectrum of public diplomacy is that they are caught in a public harness that rightfully prescribes that the national interest takes precedence. Even though the national interest is encapsulated in a mutual interest, it is striving for 'power over' versus 'power to' that decreases the diplomats' legitimacy in having to pursue all at the same time. It is easier to perceive non-state actors as practising legitimate engagement, since their self-interest often lies beyond the national interest and therefore the win–win objective holds more credibility for foreign publics. The perception of legitimate intent strengthens the socialization process, which in turn creates the ability to attract.

There should be rising awareness in ministries of foreign affairs that it is often the very role of diplomats in certain contexts that prevents them from becoming the most effective actors in practising public diplomacy. This is not to say that diplomats cannot or should not pursue a more dialogical public diplomacy that has shared interests at heart. On the contrary, this is a trend that should be stimulated and applauded. However, governments have to remember the age-old adage that legitimacy comes by foot and goes on horseback. This means that long-term investments have to be made in reconnecting with people in the MENA region in order to rebuild trust and legitimacy. The Arab Spring offers the opportunity to act as a catalyst for this process if Western governments are willing to invest actively in bringing shared interests closer. Meanwhile, however, diplomats will continue to face limitations because legitimacy first has to be rebuilt and because they must continue primarily to serve national interests.

In her latest book, Rhonda Zaharna points out that whereas diplomats aim to wield soft power through public diplomacy, non-state actors' public diplomacy activities actually seem to be generating soft power.[41] Much like government, non-state actors use information and communication to persuade and advocate, but leaning on the insights of Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink; non-state actors 'use the productive normative power of their information, ideas and strategies to alter the contexts in which non-state actors, state actors, and publics at large operate'.[42] From this openness to change, they move to engage others, both at home and abroad, through mutually constitutive socialization that stresses the importance of information exchange. Instead of wielding soft power, non-state actors actually create and increase social power to serve mutual interests. Non-state actors are thus well suited to build long-term mutual relationships, but interestingly they even prove valuable in contributing to the two other goals of public diplomacy— explaining policy decisions through daily communication and campaigning on strategic themes—because foreign publics are more susceptible to their actions. Most non-state actors are already organized around specific themes, and the long-term relationships that they build with foreign publics can provide access, as well as susceptibility in a public, in order to explain policy in times when the going is good and particularly when the going gets tough.

However, the cooperation between governments and CSOs is a fine balancing act, since CSOs' independence and critical stance towards a government and its policies are crucial to retain their legitimacy. Non-state actors can therefore never serve as a governmental public diplomacy instrument, or as actors who use their credibility to justify indiscriminately a government's policies. What they can do is to practise social diplomacy effectively in order to build long-term relationships that foster mutual understanding and that can stand strong during crisis situations. This is especially useful in the Arab world, where crises take on many forms, often making it hard for diplomats to operate. Yet whether it is a Danish cartoon crisis or the (troublesome) transitions away from authoritarian rule, the real challenge for governments and CSOs is to work in pursuit of shared goals with the people in the region, without blurring the lines between the activities and identity of each other.

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41) Zaharna, *Battles to Bridges*, p. 93.

42) Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998), *Activists Beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca NY and London: Cornell University Press), p. 12, as quoted in Zaharna, *Battles to Bridges*, p. 94.

The Need for Non-State Actors in Public Diplomacy

While non-state actors need to retain their independence and ability to criticize governments, at times there are certain advantages in practising public diplomacy in cooperation with the government. The government can than benefit from the advantages of civil society through an arm's length approach. Such cooperation must take into account that the nature of the relationship with the government can greatly impact upon the perceived legitimacy of the public diplomacy activity. In highly interconnected spheres, such as in the European Union, state and non-state actors have proven very effective in finding a symbiosis in which public and social diplomacy reinforce one another. In this regard the European Union's Trade–Civil Society Dialogue is exemplary of the seat and voice that non-state actors have gained at the table.[43]

This cooperation has proven much more difficult in the MENA region, where the levels of actors' interconnectedness are low and open public debate and engagement are troublesome because of the strict political context. A Western state's room to manoeuvre and a diplomat's public reach are strongly curtailed in semi-authoritarian and authoritarian regimes, and states and diplomats need to adapt to the restricted circumstances. The evolution of public diplomacy lays down new demands for the characteristics of a diplomat. The developments in, and most notably beyond, public diplomacy can be read as an indication of the need for wider diplomatic change. However, using this argument to focus solely on the role of the diplomat and the need to enhance his/her skill set can fall into the trap of attempting to save the diplomat's role while bypassing the opportunities that new non-state actors have to offer.[44]

Copeland, for example, argues for the training of 'guerrilla diplomats' who can connect with foreign populations in an unthreatening manner in fast-changing challenging settings. The evolved diplomat can then make a better contribution to resolving insurgencies as a critical component of new security.[45] A successful public diplomacy strategy in the MENA region would certainly be aided by greater specialization and independence of diplomats. But such a strategy cannot simply rely on new diplomats with broader skill sets; it also has to recognize the limitations of diplomatic actors. Diplomats

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43) Brian Hocking (2008), 'Reconfiguring Public Diplomacy: From Competition to Collaboration', in Jolyon Welsh and Daniel Fern (eds), *Engagement: Public Diplomacy in a Globalized World* (London: Foreign and Commonwealth Office), p. 70.

44) Hall, 'The Transformation of Diplomacy', p. 251.

45) Daryl Copeland (2009), *Guerrilla Diplomacy: Rethinking International Relations* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner), pp. 205–232.

should expand their international and local networks, be more open to dialogue, increase their language skills, and dare to take more risks. However, diplomats are posted for only limited time periods and have to prioritize the core business of diplomacy: serving the national interest and mainly using soft power in its service.

With continued budget cuts and downscaling, it is unrealistic to claim that diplomats can best serve the national interest, global interest, local interest, official relationships and unofficial networks simultaneously in a day's work. As is also argued by Ian Hall, it may be the case that not the diplomat, but other actors—whose legitimacy is not comprised by pursuing national political agendas—are far better equipped to deal with diplomacy's new demands.[46] Fortunately, the diplomat is not the only player in the public diplomacy field. It can be more effective in certain situations for non-state actors to take on social diplomacy, while the diplomat steps out of the picture or facilitates the process through background coordination and support. One such example is the case of the controversial film *Fitna* by Dutch politician Geert Wilders, wherein the activities of Dutch civil society were instrumental in managing responses in the Arab and Islamic world. Independent organizations proved successful in actively appealing to shared values, approaching key opinion leaders, distributing trustworthy facts and figures about the Muslim community in the Netherlands, and ultimately in subduing much of the unrest that could have unfolded as with the earlier Danish cartoon crisis. The key was their trusted role and position, combined with the fact that engaged relationships had already been formed prior to the crisis.

Hence, in engaging with foreign publics, CSOs can enjoy a number of distinct advantages over governments. They can have the knowledge, expertise and trained staff that is often missing in public diplomacy departments. Their independent position and critical stance *vis-à-vis* their own government also gives them a dose of credibility and legitimacy that governments can never attain. Western governments' double standards in the MENA region, combined with the region's many (semi-)authoritarian governments, leads to the understandable response of frowning upon any government-initiated action. CSOs also have greater freedom to engage with activists abroad, without directly endangering them through governmental affiliation.[47] This special position for CSOs may explain why polling data and numerous interviews show that local, national and international NGOs and civil society are viewed favourably across Muslim-majority countries and by Muslim youth in particular.[48]

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46) Hall, 'The Transformation of Diplomacy', p. 251.

47) This is not to say that CSOs enjoy freedom in the region; they too are severely restricted depending on the country and context.

48) Hady Amr (2004), *The Need to Communicate: How to Improve US Public Diplomacy with the Islamic World* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution), pp. 15 and 42.

Virtually any report on public diplomacy therefore stresses the need to make use of the potential of non-state actors, in particular CSOs, to engage and improve relationships with Arab and/or Islamic publics.[49] The current uprisings for freedom and democracy in the MENA region show the strength of people and the mushrooming local and regional CSOs. Many Western CSOs are institutionalized and professional organizations with the ability to provide assistance and partnership to help bring about the aims of people in the MENA region. Now, more than ever, is the time to initiate, stimulate and expand connections in the social diplomacy realm, so that CSOs in the West can support their partners in the East, backed by the necessary diplomatic support behind the scenes.

The unique and credible role of civil society actors thus holds promising opportunities for structurally improving relations through socialization in the long run, playing a de-escalating role in contingency plans in the short run in so-called 'crisis public diplomacy', and in building genuine relationships during the troubling phase of revolution and transition (such as in Egypt and Tunisia, but also in Libya and Syria), when the hands of Western governments are tied to the more distant official diplomatic sphere.[50]

While there is clear added value in the expansion and professionalization of the involvement of non-state actors in practising social diplomacy, the challenges that they face in the Arab and Islamic world should not be downplayed. To make the social diplomacy of non-state actors and the public diplomacy of state actors truly complementary, a symbiosis must be found wherein both can operate independently but draw on each other's strengths when striving for shared interests with a foreign population. In exploring this opportunity for the MENA region, we must preserve a modest outlook and understand the need to customize the practice to challenges and opportunities as they arise, for they are subject to continuous change.

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49) Among others, see Amr, *The Need to Communicate*, p. 42; Hady Amr and P.W. Singer (2008), 'To Win the War on Terror, We Must First Win the "War of Ideas": Here's How', *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 618, p. 7; Craig Charney and Nicole Yakatan (2005), *A New Beginning* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations), p. 4; Brian Hocking (2004), 'Privatizing Diplomacy?', *International Studies Perspectives*, 5, p. 147; Kraidy, 'Arab Media and US Policy', p. 11; Kristin M. Lord (2008), *Voices of America* (Washington DC: The Brookings Institution), p. 40; and Shaun Riordan (2004), 'Dialogue-based Public Diplomacy: A New Foreign Policy Paradigm?', Clingendael Discussion Papers in Diplomacy, pp. 5–7.

50) Uffe Andreasen (2008), 'Reflections on Public Diplomacy after the Danish Cartoon Crises: From Crises Management to Normal Public Diplomacy Work', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 3, pp. 201–207, at p. 203.

3. Translating Public and Social Diplomacy into Network Practice

Structuring the Rules of Engagement

The move to combine public diplomacy with non-state actors' social diplomacy in a non-hierarchical network-approach that is centred on dialogue, partnership and collaboration with foreign publics is easier said than done. Such a combination requires rules of engagement that guide the selection of actors, the process in which they are participating and their continued independence from one another. This is particularly important when participants who adhere to different norms, methods and behavioural systems want to collaborate on an equal footing.[51] Whereas non-state actors' social diplomacy activities are ongoing in multiple transnational networks, the majority of governments still lack a strategy for how to incorporate these new actors and grasp the opportunities that they seem to hold.

In order to practise inclusive public diplomacy, governments need to step into a process that is focused on partnership. This translates into shared ownership and responsibility over the process and its input and output. The specific importance of a credible socialization process and its ability to create social power requires all parties to be transparently connected and open to each other's influence and ideas. Connections among actors in a network must therefore be multidirectional in nature; the network's creation and

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51)   Hocking, 'Reconfiguring Public Diplomacy', pp. 72–73.

evolution cannot be monopolized by one player, and the credibility and sustainability of the process involves the early involvement of a multitude of different actors who co-create its message and strategy. In the words of Castells, this means that: 'This goes beyond creating communities of chosen hierarchies, to engaging on a genuinely symmetrical, peer-to-peer engagement aimed at engaging in collective effort with groups that were previously largely only considered as part of the target audience'.[52]

Zaharna's book highlights the power of the organization of transnational advocacy networks (TANs), which operate in a similar fashion. TANs are not only exemplary of productive power and the possibilities of collective mobilization through exchange, but they are also made up of players whom governments and other actors wish to engage and mobilize in their efforts to forge better relationships with foreign populations. Moreover, TANs' networked style of operation closely resembles the ideal that is sketched by public and social diplomacy, which moves beyond the diplomat and the national interest. TANs manage to engage participants, share ownership and produce soft power through the dynamics of network communication. TANs have thus managed to produce and use power without drawing on specific soft-power resources. It is therefore unsurprising that Anne-Marie Slaughter, former US State Department Director of Policy Planning, emphasizes that the power of actors will be increasingly defined according to their network: 'who is connected to whom and for what purposes'.[53]

Networks are relations-centred communicative strategies.[54] As social structures, they organize interactions among actors that impact upon their behaviour. A comfortable network structure for governments practising public diplomacy is the hub: a network organized by and around one actor, which forms the focal point of all connections and holds central leadership over the network, its information, communication and resources. The government, as the central player, thereby has a great degree of power and responsibility. While other actors gain from their association through the multiplier effect, the impact of this effect can be mitigated by the control that the hub-actor holds over the entire process. The central actor draws the greatest utility from the network, since it can decide on the network's purpose and direction.[55]

For many actors, including non-state actors, this is the preferred format for engagement, since it allows them to increase efficiency, manage complexity and reap the benefits of a network approach without giving up control over the strategy and goals of the process. In public diplomacy,

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52) Manuel Castells (2000), 'Materials for an Exploratory Theory of the Network Society', *British Journal of Sociology*, 51(1), p. 135.

53) Hocking, 'Reconfiguring Public Diplomacy', p. 112.

54) Zaharna, *Battles to Bridges*, p. 111.

55) Martin Kearns (2007), 'Network-Centric Advocacy' (version 4.0), p. 3, available online at http://www.greenmediatoolshed.org.

governments are keen on using this form of networked organizational engagement. It is not just a safe option because you can control input, planning, management and output, for this control also allows for greater accountability in spending tax money on public diplomacy initiatives. The growing realization that networks are crucial for public diplomacy is a positive development, but hubs that are dominated by the government generally fail to connect public diplomacy to social diplomacy because they do not guarantee the independence of other actors. Instead of moving from the proverbial cathedral to the bazaar, such hubs hold the danger of simply building cathedrals in the bazaar.[56]

A recent example of government investment in networks is the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs' project that established regional public diplomacy hubs in Dutch embassies in Washington, Beijing and Cairo.[57] The challenge with such endeavours is to find a network structure in which actors can keep enough control to account for their investments domestically (or towards their donors), and share enough control for the mutual socialization process, thereby making it interesting for local actors to become involved voluntarily.

The all-channel or multi-hub model is better suited to these demands than the single hub model. In this network, the actors are all interconnected, and communication and information flows are multidirectional and simultaneous.[58] Kearns describes the structure as a 'hybrid of the individual determination and participation typical of direct and grassroots models with the efficiencies and strengths of the organizational model'.[59] On paper it looks like a web of criss-cross connections that allow for the sharing and development of information among all of the actors. In reality, however, forming non-discriminatory connections allows actors to profit from the multiplier effect, and to bring network synergy to a higher level by co-creating a message, narrative, identity and strategy in the process. Zaharna confirms that this form of network communication 'rests on a network strategy that uses—rather than simply disseminates—information. TANs strategically use information to co-create credibility, master narratives and identity'.[60] There is no central leadership or domination over the network. This gives its individual parts—governments and local, national and international CSOs—the power and responsibility to carry momentum, both as independent players and as a movement.

In order to affect behavioural change, a network not only needs to convene and bring the right people together to co-create solutions, but these

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56) Castells, 'Materials for an Exploratory Theory of the Network Society', pp. 132–135.

57) Maxime J.M. Verhagen (2010), '*Kamerbrief inzake beeldvorming over Nederland in landen met een moslimmeerderheid*', 12 March (The Hague: Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs).

58) Zaharna, *Battles to Bridges*, p. 101.

59) Kearns, 'Network-Centric Advocacy', p. 3.

60) Zaharna, *Battles to Bridges*, p. 107.

also need to be co-implemented.[61] A network therefore needs actors (state or non-state) who are able and willing to use their organizational skills to manage smaller, self-organized teams to implement the message and strategy that they agree upon.[62] Governments or CSOs can thus still operate as a hub for a group of actors who work towards a shared end, by simultaneously joining and drawing on the overlapping efforts of other hubs in the network.[63] Whether actors are able to take up such a position in the network depends on the voluntary attraction of other actors. This attraction depends on the credibility of their commitment and promises. In general these can be summed up from the standards that actors in TANs apply: 'accuracy of information, independence [...], accountability [...], commitment and perseverance, inclusiveness [...], and transparency'.[64] If an actor—whether government or CSO—succeeds in obtaining a hub position in a multi-hub network, then it manages to engage and attract foreign populations credibly while sharing ownership and partnership over a process that serves both the national and public interest through the creation of collective soft power.

This is exactly what happened in the widely cited example of the Nobel Prize-winning International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL). Starting with six NGOs, the campaign quickly expanded to attract and include 1,000 NGOs, which devised their own national and international campaigns by drawing on shared information and strategies provided by members of the organically expanding TAN. Over 60 states became involved in the overall network and national campaigns. Canada eventually took the lead of a hub of like-minded small- and medium-sized countries, but multiple hubs of combinations of countries and non-state actors were increasing each other's positive influence.[65]

The ICBL and other TANs have seen increased participation from (mainly Western) governments over the years. This shows that a certain realization is seeping through that direct involvement in shared solutions for shared problems might be the ultimate form of smart power.[66] In the window

61) Lucian Hudson and Alan Anstead (2008), 'How Government, Business and Non-Governmental Organizations can Work Together to Address Global Challenges', *Engagement, Public Diplomacy in a Globalised World* London: Foreign and Commonwealth Office), p. 148.

62) Kearns, 'Network-Centric Advocacy', p. 3.

63) David Ronfeldt and John Arquilla (2001), 'What Next for Networks and Netwars?', in David Ronfeldt and John Arquilla (eds), *Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime and Militancy* (Washington: RAND Corporation), p. 323.

64) Zaharna, *Battles to Bridges*, p. 108.

65) Zaharna, *Battles to Bridges*, p. 106; International Campaign to Ban Landmines, information available online at www.icbl.org.

66) Don Hubert (2000), 'The Landmine Ban: Case Study in Humanitarian Advocacy', *Occasional Papers by the Thomson J. Watson Junior Institute for International Studies*, 42 (Providence RI: Brown University), p. 70.

of opportunity that is opening in the MENA region, and with transitions that are in full swing, it is crucial that governments learn to operate more effectively in these TAN-like structures to strengthen their public diplomacy strategies with those of social diplomacy.

An Open-Source Mindset to Niche Diplomacy

Within this structure of public and social diplomacy, actors need to take on a new mindset. Ali Fisher refers to this as the 'open-source approach', which revolves around four principles for engagement.[67] Taking on this new mindset may be the most challenging for governments, since they tend to be reluctant about changes that loosen their grip on power over processes.

The principles are therefore described from a government perspective. First, actors need to treat each other as equal co-developers in a peer-to-peer fashion. Relation-centred networks use an entirely different sequencing than the hierarchical set-up of a state's public diplomacy. In networks, members establish the structure for effective communication before co-creating the narrative and strategy. When governments decide to operate in networks with the aim of building better relationships, they must realize that their target audience in the MENA region has turned into their co-producer. This holds the most powerful possibility of soft power when others—other states, CSOs or people in a foreign public—voluntarily pursue your values. In summary, when 'you can expect others to advocate your ideas (not because they are yours, but because they are also their ideas)'.[68] Second, actors need to communicate in a common language, so governments need to communicate with their co-developers—whether engaged citizens, NGOs or business—in a way that resonates with them. Diplomats need to be willing to climb down from the ivory tower to a level playing field. Third, an actor's credibility is strongly linked to willingness to operate in a transparent and accountable way. Government officials should refrain from making empty promises, but should have the commitment to be held accountable for putting their actions where their mouth is. Fourth, the open-source approach is based on shared interest. This means that acquiring a hub position in a multi-hub network requires the ability to offer and organize what is in demand at a shared grassroots level. This can be more easily done when a government has a 'niche', or certain foreign policy specialization, from which it derives specific advantages, expertise and added value in a situation. The idea of 'niche diplomacy' refers to a government's decision to focus on specific areas in which it is 'best able

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67) Ali Fisher (2008), 'Music for the Jilted Generation: Open-Source Public Diplomacy', *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 3(2), pp. 137–144.

68) Fisher, 'Music for the Jilted Generation', p. 141.

to generate returns worth giving, rather than trying to cover the field'.[69] In order to gain greater power in a network through occupying a hub-position, you need to play by the rules of the network and to bring something that is in demand.

The experience of TANs shows that building a network requires a group of different actors to be involved from the start. When governments wish to perform a proactive new public diplomacy strategy to build better relationships, it is first important to gather a broadly representative yet diverse group of actors in social diplomacy around the table as equals in order to identify their needs and frustration. On the basis of this inventory, a government can decide where the shared interest lies and where it has a niche, or added value, to fuel engagement. In niche diplomacy, states use their specific assets as a specialization to guide foreign policy and international engagement, rather than focusing on the entire spectrum. Niches are crucial for engagement, since identifying shared interests is not necessarily enough reason for engaging in further relations. In contexts where some actors are unlikely to engage with one another because of numerous constraints, niches can offer both the reason and justification to follow up on shared interests in one way or another.

It is hereby important to realize that governments do not necessarily have to be the ones that start up the process. Their early involvement can do a great deal to speed up processes, but what is important is that the network remains co-produced and co-created. The open nature of networks, again with the ICBL campaign as an example, proves that it can still be very effective for governments to jump on the bandwagon of initiatives (in their areas of respective expertise) that have sprung up beyond their own control. Both Canada and Norway are examples of countries that have done this on numerous occasions, using their niche to obtain hub-roles in existing networks. Their open commitment and collaboration with networks of diverse actors in the service of global public goods has greatly benefited their credibility and attraction, allowing them to 'punch above their weight'.[70]

Governments that prioritize improving relationships in the MENA region, and that recognize their own values in those of the people who are demanding democracy and rule of law, should therefore seize the moment and jump on the bandwagon of calls for change. Their diplomatic options are currently limited in a country such as Syria under Bashar al-Assad, but this is all the more reason to make use of a multi-hub structure to support people's human rights through social diplomacy, with public diplomacy backing in the national and multinational realms. Since networks are hard to grasp, mapping

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69) Gareth Evans and Bruce Grant (1991), *Australia's Foreign Relations in the World of the 1990s* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press), p. 323, as quoted in Melissen, *The New Public Diplomacy*, p. 83, footnote 43.

70) Henrikson, 'Niche Diplomacy in the World Public Arena', p. 82 (conclusion).

them is one of the most helpful ways to identify their structure and key players. For diplomats, such an illustration should feed the analysis of understanding, assessing and strategizing their position in a network and their engagement with foreign audiences.[71] Whereas the exact role of social media in the Arab Spring is yet to be determined, identifying these social-media connections is one of the most tangible and accessible ways to start gaining insight into the workings and soft-power relations of networks. In fact, future case-study research should therefore include analysis of whether strategizing in multi-hub social-media networks could be an effective additional method for diplomats to practise social diplomacy in relationship to CSOs in countries and areas where diplomatic practice is severely limited.

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71) Fisher (2011), 'With or Without You: Conceptualizing European Public Diplomacy as a Multidimensional Endeavour', working paper for the workshop titled 'Public Diplomacy in the European Union: Soft Power at Work', 23–24 June 2011, Clingendael Institute, the Netherlands.

4. Customizing Public Diplomacy to the MENA Region

The (Changing) Context of the MENA Region

Incorporating public diplomacy with social diplomacy in a multi-hub network will only be effective in fostering closer relationships with people in the MENA region when people and organizations from the region become an active part of the network to address global, regional or local problems. The Arab Spring, with its grassroots calls for democracy and human rights, exemplifies that people in the region are proactive in pursuing their rights, but in countries such as Syria and Libya it also revealed the impairments of the strict social and political context for local and international actors. Even in those countries where the Arab Spring has proven successful to date, not all changes happen overnight. The translation of theory into practice thus requires customizing the ideal-type multi-hub framework to the realities of a less than ideal context. No discussion of the challenges and opportunities in this region can do justice to its diversity, and its ongoing transitions do not make analysis any easier. But besides signifying the difficulty, these transitions also signify the importance of customizing public diplomacy to the ever-changing contexts that affect its application.

In January 2011 the Tunisian people managed to oust authoritarian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. One month later another authoritarian ruler, Hosni Mubarak, was forced to step down after weeks of protests in Egypt's largest cities. The people's success sparked demonstrations and unrest of varying intensity throughout the region, ranging from Morocco to Jordan,

Bahrain, Yemen, Libya and Syria. The unrest was put down harshly in many cases, most notably in Libya and Syria. In Libya, Muammar Gaddafi's violence against the protestors led NATO to intervene. After months of conflict, the rebels seem close to victory, but even when all pro-Gaddafi strongholds have been defeated the future developments of the country remain hard to predict. In Syria, Bashar al-Assad violently put down dissent, while rumours of massacres spread, with the details unknown because of barring of the press. Much like the Libyan Transitional Council, which gained recognition internationally, the opposition in Syria has formed a Syrian National Council (SNC). Its chances of success are hard to gauge in a continuously changing setting, but the Syrian government has made it clear that it will not be overturned without a fight. Obviously, the results of the Arab Spring remain unclear at this stage, but regardless of specific outcomes, these events have already flung the MENA region into incredible transitions.

Current events stand in stark contrast to the years proceeding 2011, when there was little to show for indigenous and external pushes for reform.[72] According to the Freedom House index report from 2009—which applies the terms 'free', 'partially free' and 'unfree'—Indonesia was the only Muslim-majority country that was deemed free at the time. 'Free' is understood by the index as being open to political competition, having respect for civil liberties, significant independent civic life and an independent media. In the Middle East the situation remained dire, with few improvements over the years; no country—with Israel as a notable exception—was deemed to be free. A minority comprised of Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain and Yemen were considered partially free, meaning that important restrictions on political rights and civil liberties are in place. The other countries in the region, including Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which are widely considered as allies of Western nations, were categorized as not free. According to the categorization, these 'unfree' countries lack basic political rights and systematically deny the civil liberties of their population.[73]

These categorizations reveal the harsh reality that the Middle East has long been one of the least democratic regions in the world. However, before the uprisings of 2011, recent years did see a surge in modest political reforms in many of the region's authoritarian and semi-authoritarian governments.[74]

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72) Marina Ottaway, Nathan J. Brown, Amr Hamzawy, Karim Sadjapour and Paul Salem (2008), *The New Middle East* (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace), pp. 21–25.

73) Freedom House (2009a), 'Freedom in the World: 2009 Survey Map', available online at http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/fiw09/MOF09.pdf.

74) These reforms include 'the establishment of representative assemblies in United Arab Emirates, Oman and Qatar; the return of an elected parliament in Bahrain; the holding of multi-candidate presidential elections in Egypt in 2005; and the organization of partial local elections in Saudi Arabia in 2006 (limited to men only). Reform initiatives also included the adoption of a code of personal status law in Algeria and Morocco, and the creation of the

These reforms were important, but turned out to be superficial. They did not change the structures of power, most notably the executive branch's domination, and they were often accompanied by amendments that imposed further restrictions on citizen's rights in other areas. These far-reaching amendments have tended to impact negatively upon freedom of association, organization and of participation in free and fair elections. The expected progress of many reforms was thus nullified. These reforms' intentions have been the topic of fierce debate. In the absence of any real change, many have concluded that the supposed reforms actually revealed governments' intentions of clinging to power rather than sharing it. This follows the reasoning that allowing a small and tightly controlled increase in freedom can simultaneously subdue civil disturbance and satisfy external voices (state and non-state) that are demanding progress.[75]

Unsurprisingly, the development of active and independent CSOs gained little from the rounds of cosmetic reforms. Although civil society should act as 'a counterweight to state power, it also needs the state's legal protection to ensure the autonomy and freedom of action of its members'.[76] Lack of the latter is part of the reason why civil society struggles to fulfil its functions in much of the MENA region. From the public diplomacy perspective this is worrisome, because local civil society actors tend to be natural 'go-to' places when it comes to identifying, addressing and mobilizing action. In the MENA region, civil society has developed in a context that is shaped by foreign interventions, the ingrained culture of confession-based philanthropy by charitable organizations, and stringent imposed controls by governments.[77] As a rule of thumb, government treatment of CSOs can be seen as increasingly restrictive when social and political inequalities are involved.[78]

The picture of government response to civil society development in the Arab world is mixed. As stated in the *Arab Human Development Report*:

> Some ban their activities altogether; others tolerate them while making it as difficult as possible for them to operate by tying them up in red tape, interposing obstacles to their registration and

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Justice and Reconciliation Commission in Morocco'. See *Arab Human Development Report* (2009), p. 69.

75) *Arab Human Development Report* (2009), p. 69.

76) Nawaf Salam (2002), 'Civil Society in the Arab World: The Historical and Political Dimensions', *Harvard University Islamic Legal Studies Program Occasional Papers*, 3, p. 3.

77) These confession-based organizations are not limited to the origins of the Islamic *Zakat* and *Waqf*, but many charitable organizations.

78) Mervat Rishmawi and Tim Morris (2007), 'Overview of Civil Society in the Arab World' (Oxford: International NGO Training and Resource Centre), pp. 5 and.11, available online at http://www.intrac.org/data/files/resources/421/Praxis-Paper-20-Overview-of-Civil-Society-in-the-Arab-World.pdf.

scrutinizing their finances, especially from foreign sources. Most
organizations live with these restrictions and try to work around
them.[79]

The treatment of CSOs can be more clearly summarized in four
categories, or a combination thereof: blatant repression; liberalization to allow
limited progress that cannot endanger government power; systematic policies
to prevent CSOs from operating effectively; and/or co-optation.[80] CSOs have
had varying levels of success in managing the system, but government scrutiny
of civil society severely impacts upon their actions on all levels. It is therefore
unsurprising that the largest numbers and most active CSOs can be found in
the Palestinian Territories and Lebanon, places where political freedom ranks
relatively high in the region. It is also notable that despite the heavy
restrictions imposed by emergency law, Egypt was among the frontrunners in
civil society development and activities, while Syria and the oil-rich Gulf
States lag far behind.[81]

The media is another actor that has to deal with intrusive government
meddling and censorship. The media in the MENA region has undergone
unprecedented changes in the past two decades. Almost without exception,
the period before 1990 was marked by a landscape in which all media-related
aspects were government-controlled. Today over 300 Arabic broadcasting
channels from a wide ideological spectrum reach out to publics with
competing social, political, economic and religious agendas.[82] In this
competitive information environment, governments continue to try and
monopolize information flows, but alternative sources of information, such as
Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, have been attracting the lion's share of attention.[83]

While much has changed in this regard, much has also remained the
same. A massive disconnect remains between the booming Arab media scene
and the lack of improvements in press freedom. Press freedom in the Arab
world in 2009 was still so limited that no country was considered to have a
'free press'.[84] Most of the broadcasting channels and newspapers remain
privately owned, affiliated or heavily influenced by governments—if not
through direct government pressure, then by government restrictions and
limitations that are designed to numb criticism.[85] Again, the state of affairs

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79) *Arab Human Development Report* (2009), p. 71.

80) Sean L. Yom (2005), 'Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World', *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 9(4), p. 23–34.

81) Yom, 'Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World', p. 16; and Rishmawi and Morris, 'Overview of Civil Society in the Arab World', p. 13–24.

82) Kraidy, 'Arab Media and US Policy', pp. 3–4.

83) Kraidy, 'Arab Media and US Policy', pp. 4–6.

84) Freedom House (2009b), 'Press Freedom in the World 2009 Survey Map', available online at http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=251&year=2009.

85) Kraidy, 'Arab Media and US Policy', p. 3.

varies significantly from country to country in the region, but government censorship has proven particularly effective in traditional media formats in countries such as Syria and Saudi Arabia.

It is unsurprising that the internet has fed into the hope that censorship can be subverted. It is important that the internet is also essential for social diplomacy, citizen journalism and citizen activism. The internet is one of the main reasons that multi-hub networks of very diverse actors around the globe are able to function effectively in real-time. The effectiveness and intensity of internet censorship ranges from filtering and banning morally and/or politically inappropriate sites (Saudi Arabia, Syria and Yemen), to 'merely' filtering political opposition on the web (United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Jordan), to unfiltered internet access (Lebanon and Kuwait). Regardless of the scope of censorship, it is common throughout the MENA region for security organs to track internet traffic and content.[86] In addition to citizens of the MENA region, NGO workers, journalists and bloggers have been detained and prosecuted for their online criticism of authorities.[87]

Despite censorship, hope in the internet revolution remains as more people in the Arab world, particularly youth, are drawn to the web and find better ways to hide their identities and circumvent government filters. During the last five years internet proliferation in Arab countries has increased, but other than Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) internet use lags behind the 21 per cent global average.[88] Increasing internet use is supported by the relatively low access costs compared to global standards, but the ability to afford this is directly linked to GDP per capita income, which varies greatly across Arab countries and explains why the four countries above, which are all members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, have managed to obtain such high standards of internet penetration while other Arab countries are moving at a slower pace.[89] The growth of the internet is mainly centred on youth who are able to afford access. Whereas traditional media—such as television, radio and print—remain the communication channels with the broadest reach, this has not prevented Arab users from using the internet for online and real-life activism. It is interesting here that in domestic activism, mobile phones may play an even greater role

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86) Albrecht Hofheinz (2005), 'The Internet in the Arab World: Playground for Political Liberalization', *International Politics and Society*, 3, pp. 79–80.

87) Human Rights Watch (2010), 'A Wasted Decade' (New York: Human Rights Watch), p. 13; and Human Rights Watch (2007), 'Egypt: Blogger's Imprisonment Sets Chilling Precedent', available online at http://www.hrw.org/en/ news/2007/02/21/egypt-blogger-s-imprisonment-sets-chilling-precedent. See many other reports and press releases on the arrest of bloggers in the Arab world at www.hrw.org.

88) Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation and the UNDP (2009), *Arab Knowledge Report 2009* (Dubai: Al Ghurair Printing & Publishing House), p. 146.

89) Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation and the UNDP (2009), *Arab Knowledge Report 2009*, pp. 147–148.

than the internet.[90] Mobile phone use is not only more widespread, but provides direct interpersonal contact, and as a result more reliable connections. The role of the internet and mobile phones has already become clear in the Egyptian *Kefaya* movement for change. The role was even more prominent during the 2005 mass demonstrations in Lebanon of the March 8 and March 14 Alliances for and against Syria's presence and involvement in Lebanon, which led to the Cedar Revolution. On a large scale, these events and the recent demonstrations in the Arab Spring across the MENA region signify the increasingly dominant role of these mediums in connecting with one another, but perhaps most notably with the world at large.

In the light of public and social diplomacy, it is important to note that the concentration of the internet in countries, and certain sections of the population, limits its reach. Nonetheless, its importance among youth—a group that is more inclined and able to engage in multi-hub networks—is a huge asset. Even though the internet has global reach, its effective use in relation to others, particularly when risks are involved, still relies strongly on interpersonal connections and social trust.[91] People are subjected to a number of different socialization processes and that makes them inherently critical and selective. This holds for all people, but is particularly strong in the MENA region where people have been endlessly subjected to their own governments' and foreign propaganda.

Interpersonal communication with trusted and selected sources is therefore the most important way to persuade people to share or accept information, and to become engaged in some sort of action. In the words of Zaharna, 'the more interconnected actors in a network are to one another, the more those actors trust one another, and are willing to exchange resources (tangible and intangible), thus benefiting the network'.[92] This willingness can be constrained by context, but needs to be present in a diverse array of actors in order for a multi-hub network to function. The trust to build such interconnections cannot be taken for granted, but needs to be earned.

The demonstrations, uprisings and unrest, and the following transitions in power and violent backlashes, change the context in the MENA region. People in the MENA region are pursuing those interests that Western governments claim also to pursue: democracy, human rights and rule of law. Moreover, people in the region are pursuing these goals while making use of the modern multi-hub format. Western governments should not waste this window of opportunity by standing idle while their diplomats' hands are tied or are not even allowed at the scene. These circumstances cannot be changed, but what can be done is to use public diplomacy and diplomats' connections in multi-hub networks to support the struggle for shared interests on the

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90) Kraidy, 'Arab Media and US Policy',p. 12.
91) Kraidy, 'Arab Media and US Policy'.
92) Zaharna, *Battles to Bridges*, p. 104.

ground through social diplomacy, backed by traditional diplomacy through its multinational official channels.

Dilemmas

In a region where a combination of public and social diplomacy is needed the most, it is also most difficult to implement. The specific context and constantly shifting realities on the ground impose severe limitations on its practice. High hopes should therefore be tempered by a pragmatic outlook that addresses restrictions, in order to customize any diplomatic approach to reality.

In a context where individual and organizational actors' actions are heavily restricted, it is more effective to organize according to the structure of a multi-hub network. Actors can then share responsibility and multiply influence. However, as Manuel Castells has argued: 'networks, as social forms, are value-free or neutral. They can kiss or kill; nothing personal'.[93] In a combination of public and social diplomacy, networks are presented as structures that can enable the socialization process and make cooperation among state and international, national and local non-state actors possible. This cooperation may be made possible through networks, but this is not necessarily consequential given that the development of (multi-hub) network forms was originally spurred by the need of non-state actors to organize effectively *against* the state apparatus. The same has occurred in the current Arab Spring in the MENA region, where people have massed in organized protest against (semi-)authoritarian governments.

This essentially reveals two things. First, strategies of confrontation and cooperation have both served the goals of state and non-state actors in relation to one another. It cannot be taken for granted that cooperation of some form, even among non-state actors or CSOs, will simply take place with a public diplomacy denominator. In relation to a number of countries in the MENA region, the specific problem arises that even when the goals and interests of foreign governments, international non-state actors and local non-state actors converge, it may be more beneficial for the local non-state actors to adopt confrontational strategies. This often happens in order to prevent a stigmatizing accusation of 'hailing with the enemy'. These situations need to be carefully assessed to determine when the public with government involvement (of some form) is an asset or a liability. This will be explored further in the next section.

Second, as much as networks can be used by actors to serve a public good, networks can also be used or abused by actors (state and non-state

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93) Castells, 'Materials for an Exploratory Theory of the Network Society', p. 16, also quoted in Zaharna, *Battles to Bridges*, p. 114.

alike) with malign intent.[94] Selecting actors for engagement is a controversial topic in both a public/social diplomacy approach—which prescribes non-discrimination, diversity and openness—and in the Middle East, where specific reservations are held against a number of actors. This concern about the agenda of 'who will come in next' plays a strong role in Western governments' hesitant responses to the MENA region's current uprisings, and will be addressed after an analysis of the more general obstacles to cooperation.

To Kiss or Kill

A new focus on mutual socialization and shared interests—in combination with an affiliation of Western, international and local non-state actors through multi-hub networks that allow participants to lean on each other's strengths and to protect each other's weaknesses—offers perspective. It would enable governments to draw on the expertise, access and legitimacy of civil society to further shared goals, while indirectly serving their national interest and increasing social power.[95]

Sounding promising, this perspective needs to be put in check by reality, because Western, Arab, Islamic and international CSOs are generally more effective and credible because they operate independently from government. The problem of creating a public diplomacy structure that can profit from civil society's legitimacy and activities is summarized by Shaun Riordan:

> Many potential agents are reluctant to be associated with government. In as far as they are perceived to operate under government direction, or with government funding, their credibility and effectiveness can be undermined. Their involvement in a public diplomacy strategy can therefore be highly problematic.[96]

If CSOs and other non-state actors are to remain credible, their critical voice needs to speak freely for and against governments' actions when they deem it necessary.[97] Any possible association with government in a network form must thus be shaped according to careful considerations that protect the

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94) Ronfeldt and Arquilla, 'What Next for Networks and Netwars?', pp. 313–314, at p. 343.

95) Jovan Kurbalija and Valentin Katrandjiev (2006), 'Multistakeholder Diplomacy: Challenges and Opportunities' (Geneva: DiploFoundation).

96) Shun Riordan (2004), 'Dialogue-based Public Diplomacy: A New Foreign Policy Paradigm?', *Clingendael Discussion Papers in Diplomacy*, p. 4.

97) Brian Hocking (2004), 'Privatizing Diplomacy?', *International Studies Perspectives*, 5, p. 147.

independence of all of the actors involved.[98] The benefits of such an association must therefore outweigh its (potential) costs.

The multi-hub network structure offers these possibilities. Actors voluntarily become connected in such a structure because of the shared interest that binds them and the possibilities that it holds for exchange and joint action. The fact that no actor, not even a government, can dominate the network ensures the participants' continued independence. As a network structure on its own, it is merely an empty shell; it is shaped by what actors put into it. Actors are free to decide how much they put in and how much they want to get out; like-minded actors can cluster in more focused hubs that can be formed without detaching from the whole. Actors also remain free to break off connections at any time when another actor—state or non-state— fails to play by the rules of engagement.

This structure has proven effective in guaranteeing the independence of Western and international CSOs in their associations with governments. In many countries of the MENA region, however, the cards have been dealt differently for local CSOs. Despite a network structure that enables independence, many arguments remain to opt for confrontation or a place at the sidelines. This is troublesome for public/social diplomacy, because it is local actors that you want to engage, but the potential costs involved can be unbearably high for them. First, in countries where their existence is entirely banned, there is practically no room to move, let alone engage. An international network may be able to support its efforts, but inside the country such support needs to be organized in silence—something that does not combine well with an approach whose goal is to engage openly. This does not exclude 'behind the scenes' forms of cooperation, of course, but these tend to fall beyond the scope of public diplomacy.

Second, public reputation and credibility are as important for domestic non-state actors as they are for governments and international civil society. Affiliation with foreign powers—whether directly or indirectly through a network format—feeds into common accusations by home governments that domestic civil society actors act as agents of foreign powers and serve an external agenda.[99] These accusations can be a very effective mechanism to discredit actors by ruining their legitimacy, undermining their support among the population and endangering their cooperation with other domestic parties. The fact that an abstract network can ensure independence holds little value when such odds are stacking up against a CSO. These odds are not only high because of the widespread supremacy of their respective governments in planting a narrative, but also because of the powerful arguments that these governments can use concerning the double standards of Western

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98) Van Doeveren and d'Hooghe, 'Engaging the Arab and Islamic World through Social Diplomacy', p. 10.

99) *Arab Human Development Report* (2009), p. 72.

governments in the region. Local CSOs cannot afford a campaign that links them to the application of double standards against their own people.

A third and interrelated reason for not cooperating is that a shared interest or goal is not necessarily brought closer by cooperation. In many countries in the MENA region, CSOs are walking on eggshells to balance their activities within the limited space under imposed government restrictions. Catching the limelight can severely endanger their activities, staff and future existence. They can even face civil or military prosecution (under emergency laws) for their local activities. An additional reason for non-cooperation that may arise and strengthen could also be the desire of people in the region to pursue change independently and on their own terms without any other actors interfering in their domestic affairs.

Reasons not to cooperate carry very different weights depending on the specific country of concern in the MENA region, and for many countries the Arab Spring has created countries and contexts that are in flux but whose exact direction remains unknown. This mapping of context and obstacles should therefore not be seen as anything more than stressing the need for tailoring public diplomacy to different and continuously changing contexts. Applying such an approach requires a country-specific analysis that progresses beyond a faint regional sketch, which risks becoming outdated in the current circumstances as soon as it is trusted to paper. The urgency for such a specific mapping—one that takes regional specifics into account—has only increased with the Arab Spring and its aftermath. In this opportunity for closer relationships, Western governments have to show their support and grasp the chance to make amends. Yet they have to do so while taking the historic and currently changing context into account. Change will not come overnight and countries in transition and/or conflict will continue to face many of the described limitations and its remnants for some time to come. Governments therefore need this connection with social diplomacy more than ever before, but continuously have to take into account how their presence can have a negative impact. In applying a joint public and social diplomacy approach, the obstacles and concerns about the selection of actors involved and specific problematic players also need to be addressed.

Selection Bias and Problematic Players

The professionalism and quality of civil society actors, both in the Western and in the Arab and Islamic world, ranges from the top to the lower end of the possible spectrum. Governments therefore prefer to be selective in their affiliations, since the danger exists that the actions of some may prove

detrimental to their position and the network.[100] Not all CSOs are do-gooders with internal democratic structures and broad-based support, and the same obviously holds for governments.[101] Whether actors should be selected, how they should be selected and who should be excluded from a public/social diplomacy approach are up for discussion. The issue is controversial because this type of combined public diplomacy actually aims to level the playing field. The core principles are openness, diversity, transparency and shared control.[102] Whereas the quality of the network may be aided by adding selection criteria, the emphasis on shared control leaves it undetermined as to who is entitled to set these standards and how they will be upheld.

One of the main problems in building relationships with foreign populations in the MENA region has been the lack of an inclusive approach by Western governments and Western and international CSOs alike. They have been inclined to work together with the usual suspects over and over again. These are CSOs that tend to bear resemblance to Western-style CSOs because of their secular and liberal nature. This selection bias has not only systematically excluded other actors from the engagement process, but it has also focused on actors who are often characterized as non-embedded elitist CSOs.[103] The fact that these CSOs have little resonance with their own population has decreased the effects that working with them has on generally improving relationships with a foreign public.[104] Referring to these usual suspects is understandable given the inherently opaque nature of the CSO scene in the MENA region, but it fails to include important stakeholders.[105] Yet this would undermine a strategy whose purpose of drawing on the strengths of both public and social diplomacy is to make a concerted effort in waving selection bias goodbye through engaging with diverse actors who are potentially more representative of the population.

While the MENA region's political situation delivers its fair dose of constraints, the actors themselves are obviously not problem-free either. This leads to the paradox that public/social diplomacy should attempt to relinquish selection bias, but its actors are inclined to reintroduce it to prevent spoilers from stepping on to the playing field. As discussions on the future of the MENA region exemplify, two potential spoilers are capable of causing particular concern. For many Western governments and CSOs, red flags go

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100) Van Doeveren and d'Hooghe, 'Engaging the Arab and Islamic World through Social Diplomacy', p. 9.

101) Castells, 'Materials for an Exploratory Theory of the Network Society', p. 16.

102) Zaharna, *Battles to Bridges*, p. 111.

103) Annie van de Pas (2010), 'Introduction', in: *Beyond Orthodox Approaches: Assessing the Opportunities for Democracy Support in the Middle East and North Africa* (The Hague: NIMD Knowledge Centre and Hivos Knowledge Programme), pp. 8 and 53.

104) John B. Alterman (2004), 'The False Promise of Arab Liberals', *Policy Review*, no. 125.

105) Yom, 'Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World', p. 19.

up once Islamists are mentioned. Likewise, many local and international non-state actors have shivered for years when government-controlled quangos (quasi non-governmental organizations) appear on the scene. These actors both test the meaning, value and commitment to diversity and inclusion in a network, and spice up the discussion on whether adjustments to these principles have to be made.

The specific nature of Islamists in the MENA region remains as undefined as what constitutes terms such as civil society or terrorism. Mainstream Islamist movements have been minimally defined as 'those that have eschewed or formally renounced violence and are pursuing their goals through peaceful political activity'.[106] This is not a standard definition, but it is clear that a wide variety of diverse Islamist movements exists. Less undefined is the fact that Islamist movements have grown into one of the most important forces in providing social services, engaging in political activism and mobilizing large constituencies. In contrast, secular organizations that are capable of providing these three things have been rare in the region. They have proven capable of incredible activation during the Arab Spring, but only the future can tell how their institutional capabilities will grow along with change.[107] Because of the power and representative nature of Islamist movements for large segments of the population, many authors have marked the so-called moderate Islamists as vital for any Arab reform.[108] The steep rise of the Islamists—moderate and non-moderate—has, however, also given rise to concern over the fact that some may be inherently undemocratic but opportune in portraying themselves as having a democratic agenda.[109]

Debating the diverse nature of the Islamist movements in detail will add little to this discussion. What is important here is that governments are obligated to refrain from engaging with organizations that are 'blacklisted' by the United Nations and/or the European Union. These lists are far from mistakes, and the justifications for putting some organizations on these lists require more detailed justification, but this does not deny the fact that governments are forced to comply. CSOs have more space for engagement in this respect, and they must make their own principled decisions. In general,

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106) Nathan J. Brown, Amr Hamzawy and Marina Ottaway (2006), 'Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World: Exploring the Gray Zones', *Carnegie Papers Middle East Series*, no. 67, p. 3.

107) Brown, Hamzawy and Ottaway, 'Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World', p. 17.

108) Muriel Asseburg (ed.) (2007), 'Moderate Islamists as Reform Actors: Conditions and Programmatic Change', *SWP Research Paper* (Berlin: *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik*); and Amr Hamzawy (2005), 'The Key to Arab Reform: Moderate Islamists', *Carnegie Endowment Policy Brief*, 40, pp. 1–7.

109) Brown, Hamzawy and Ottaway, 'Islamist Movements and the Democratic Process in the Arab World'.

the inclusion of Islamist movements—or any other organization—that can be found on the so-called blacklists leads to withdrawal of government participation. This does not necessarily close down an engagement process through multi-hub networks, since this can also continue without government involvement, but it does exclude government participation and/or support.

The other actors of specific concern are the quangos. Some Arab governments run their own human rights CSOs. These mimic the functioning of independent CSOs and usually fulfil some of these roles in providing social services and aid to the needy. They are simultaneously known to be used by (semi-)authoritarian governments to serve as surveillance mechanisms, which play an important role in silencing discord and co-opting other actors.[110] It is clear that a few actors, namely local CSOs, are keen to engage in processes and networks that share information that can be used directly against them. It depends on how you want to work the system, but if you are true to non-discriminate inclusion, then it is very hard to disallow their participation; they are not blacklisted actors and Western governments are generally unwilling to endanger their relationships with governments over this issue. The net result will be that local and many international CSOs can refuse to take part in a network that includes quangos. However, when the representative actors of the foreign population with which you are attempting to connect leave the process, the endeavour becomes pointless.

The cases of these particularly problematic players exemplify that even an open network that aims to eliminate selection bias needs to incorporate some form of selection bias. Minimal selection criteria will thus be added to complement the informal rules of engagement. A Western government is not necessarily involved in this process, but will consequently only join a process in which blacklisted organizations are excluded. In this case, actors can simply point to sources of authority to justify the rules. This leaves the problem of eliminating quangos from the process. For CSOs the solution is simple: disallow quangos or leave the network yourself. This is not a real solution for Western governments, because prioritizing diplomatic relationships would lead them to avoid aggravating another state. Hence, when the presence of Western governments endangers the network by providing justification for the participation of quangos or the like, governments need to show their commitment to the greater public good by stepping out of the process instead of eliminating it altogether. Depending on the structure of a multi-hub network, actors can sometimes—for example in social media—choose to play an inactive shadowing role: consuming but not being an active part. This can be useful in gathering information on how, where and with whom to engage on another level, but it does not directly contribute to more active and open engagement with foreign publics.

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110) Yom, 'Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World', p. 24.

Customizing Public Diplomacy

The specific obstacles that public/social diplomacy faces in the MENA region show that there is more to a theory than matching it to a more practical network structure. An approach has to be customized to context- and actual country-specifics. In the MENA region, obstacles for engagement and cooperation in a multi-hub network structure largely depend on the political freedom in domestic settings—a factor that is inherently subject to change, and now more than ever. These levels of freedom have varied immensely from one country to another, and despite the Arab Spring such variations will continue and might even grow farther apart.

Lebanon, for example, is deemed 'partially free' according to the Freedom House index, but, according to the same index, so was Egypt under Mubarak. The gap between these two countries with regard to very important freedoms for the implementation of public/social diplomacy—including freedom of association and free speech—was massive. Lebanon had considerably more social, cultural and political freedom than Egypt under Mubarak. When customizing the public/social diplomacy approach to a country one must therefore take its specifics into account. Such crucial country-specific customization lies beyond the scope of this paper, but—as a first stepping stone—an outline will be sketched for tailoring the approach at a higher level by using an adjusted format of the Freedom House index, categorizing countries as nearly free, partially free and not free.

In 'nearly free' countries, such as Lebanon and Jordan, the public/social diplomacy approach finds fewer obstacles for implementation. Besides a range of limited issues, Western governments, international CSOs and local CSOs are able to engage in a multi-stakeholder process. The multi-hub network structure can be applied at a higher international level and used domestically for direct, on-the-ground engagement. The spoiler role that quangos can fulfil in these countries is minimized by the simple fact that quangos do exist, but in smaller numbers and less intrusive ways.

In 'un-free' countries such as Saudi Arabia and Syria (under al-Assad), actors have to be creative in tailoring the approach to far-reaching limitations. Undertaking public diplomacy activities—by state and non-state actors—is particularly troublesome here and needs to take on an underground nature. Yet when public diplomacy goes underground, it can hardly be called public diplomacy anymore. International CSOs can provide such undercover support, but Western governments cannot do the same. First, they prioritize diplomatic relations and will steer clear of meddling in the internal affairs of another state. Second, such support could actually endanger local actors, who have plenty of reasons to safeguard independence from their own and foreign governments. In these un-free contexts, governments can thus only be directly involved in another country's domestic sphere through politically neutral niches. They can directly engage in a network with a foreign population to

explore shared interests and co-create solutions that are limited to 'politically neutral' terrain. These may not be the most pressing concerns of a foreign population, but can still help in building connections and credibility. While there is no possibility to join an open mutual socialization process, at least actors can start to work on laying its foundation.

All other related areas of concern can only be addressed by state and non-state actors from an arm's length distance. Without directly endangering local actors, other state and non-state actors can best approach politically controversial issues of shared interest by actively participating in international networks. These issues of overlapping interest can be framed in terms of a public good that governments and international CSOs can openly promote in international forums and organizations. While this may not constitute direct engagement through mutual socialization, there are still important gains to be made. These actions build credibility, show commitment, and work from the grassroots *and* top–down to bring about the necessary conditions for socialization processes in the entire region. Social media provides unprecedented opportunities for engagement for these countries: engagement in which a government can even be an active participant when it does so under the heading of a government spear point and from its home base, preferably by government servants who are not directly subjected to serving bilateral relations—in short, those government servants who do not enjoy diplomatic status, who carry a more general job title than many in the ministry of foreign affairs and who are perceived as less intrusive in bilateral relations or the internal affairs of a foreign state.

In partially free countries, such as Egypt was deemed to be under Mubarak, the image is mixed. Similar to un-free countries and free countries, state and non-state actors have the possibility of directly engaging with local actors when such processes concern politically neutral topics. With regard to politically less neutral topics, more leeway exists than in un-free countries, but actors have to operate very cautiously and with modest goals. Cooperation needs to be framed as neutrally as possible. Despite the shared interests that bind actors together, they need to prevent suspicions that can cause them to be shut down or that can invite the interest of quangos. The goal of such cooperation cannot go far beyond trying to stretch national conditions to allow incrementally more freedom for a proper mutual socialization process to take hold. A parallel or additional internationally networked process—online and in official diplomatic channels—can greatly aid on-the-ground efforts to improve conditions for increased accessibility of diverse actors and a more effective new public diplomacy approach.

The changes and unrest in the MENA region have added a fourth categorization to this loose customization: countries in crisis. As of writing, unrest continues in Libya and Syria, violence is rife and outcomes are uncertain. People are demanding change, but regimes clamped down with an iron fist. Uncertainty concerning the Syrian situation is particularly high at this moment in time, but what both cases reveal regardless is that these kinds

of situations call for crisis diplomacy. Stationed diplomats are no longer able to assess the situation because they are locked up in their embassies, or were even recalled. Their influence on government officials diminished as the regimes clamped down, yet a diplomatic outcry and demands from higher hands are necessary to influence the situation. Diplomats can do few things on the ground and it is hence crucial that they already have their networks in place so that they can rely on the social diplomacy of other actors. If anything, the Arab Spring has shown that the first response of governments and diplomats to the unfolding events was to remain aloof, as their hands were tied by the inherently subtle game of international relations that had to be played out at a level far removed from the streets. This does not, however, mean that diplomats have to stand idly to one side. Accepting their limitations on the ground and in their direct connections with the people in the streets does not mean that nothing can be done in the public diplomacy realm. It is crucial for diplomats and states to declare firmly their 'boundary lines' and to condemn the human rights abuses and support those struggling to defend human rights—international and local CSOs alike. In this situation, diplomats should focus on capitalizing upon their strengths and the crucial role that they have to fulfil in the hidden and official diplomatic sphere, while openly facilitating and supporting foreign publics through their (indirect) connections in public and social diplomacy networks.

A Window of Opportunity

The changes that are currently taking place in the MENA region are opportunities that Western governments cannot afford to let go. Western governments have been trying to improve relationships with people in the MENA region through public diplomacy for years, and have failed. People in the region are now demanding those changes that Western governments have been propagating for years, but that they failed to prioritize on their policy agendas. No excuses remain to the claim that there is no partner with whom to build a relationship. This does not mean, however, that engagement will be easy. While change is opening up more room for direct engagement and public/social diplomacy in some countries, as is expected for Tunisia and Egypt, in other countries the demands for change have led to unstable situations that call for intervention and crisis diplomacy. The situation will continue to differ drastically from country to country, leading the demand for truly country-level customized diplomacy to rise even further.

Connecting public with social diplomacy—that is, with non-state actors who fulfil public diplomatic activities—offers greater access to the people with whom governments are so anxious to connect. These non-state actors hold distinct advantages in the MENA region, and their legitimacy, organizational structure and connections make them actors who are well suited to build greater mutual understanding and sustainable relationships. Through multi-

hub networks, Western governments are able to connect to these social diplomacy actors and the people on the ground, and support them in pursuing shared interests. The intensity of this support and whether it is through a direct or indirect triangle of diplomats, CSOs and local representatives depends on the specific situation at hand. Western governments have to make objective assessments of the context, stakeholders, challenges and opportunities to decide wisely on whether public diplomacy improves when their role becomes more pronounced, or whether the limitations of its diplomats demand a more distant arm's length approach. All in all, the most effective public diplomacy strategy is one that draws on the strengths of other actors to compensate for its own limitations.

Conclusion

Public diplomacy is not a stationary concept or the answer to Western governments' challenges in the MENA region. It is an evolving process in response to a continuously changing world: continuously, as traditional forms of diplomacy continue to form the most important priority of governments and diplomats today; and changing, because the failure of public diplomacy to reach foreign publics led to further development of the concept and because changes on the ground demand different approaches.

Public diplomacy is still in flux, but can be marked by two distinct shifts that are vital for pursuing its relationship-building goals: it moves beyond the realm of the diplomat; and beyond serving narrow national interests. The first shift concerns *who* practises public diplomacy. It is no longer an activity that is solely reserved for diplomats, but one wherein non-state actors have a defining role to play—not only because the emphasis is on engagement and cooperation, which means that there needs to be active participation from some sort of representatives of the foreign public, but also because the diplomats' hands are often tied in places such as the MENA region. A more pragmatic acceptance of diplomats' limitations does not nullify their role, but should trigger out-of-the-box thinking about opportunities concerning concepts such as social diplomacy, which emphasizes that non-state actors (local, regional and international) may be better suited for some of public diplomacy's core tasks.

Second, whereas traditional diplomacy serves the national interest by aiming to increase soft power over a foreign population, the relationship-building component of public diplomacy should focus on a different part of the causal mechanism of power projection: the crucial step between

engagement and actual attraction; increasing the susceptibility of a foreign public through mutual socialization. Engagement aims to create a win–win situation in which both the foreign public and public diplomacy actors have a stake in the process and its outcomes. National interests are served in numerous, but more indirect ways. First, gaining mutual understanding is an important goal in its own right. Second, legitimate investment in long-term relationship-building creates greater susceptibility and a more representative frame of reference for interpreting policies and events. These can prove crucial for maintaining dialogue and for cushioning tensions in times of crisis. Third, acting beyond one's national interest, but according to one's proclaimed principles for common good, increases international legitimacy. As a notable side-effect, this increased legitimacy increases a country's soft power.

The most effective public diplomacy in improving relationships is the one that has the 'luxury' of solely focusing on this aspect of it. Governments, however, have to fulfil all three of public diplomacy's functions to serve their national interests best. This complicates a task that is already difficult to fulfil for diplomats, who have to prioritize state relations over public diplomacy, who are facing a legitimacy crisis in the MENA region and whose room to manoeuvre is at a minimum in many of the region's (semi-)authoritarian regimes. Non-state actors hold distinct advantages over diplomats since they face these challenges in lesser degrees, can draw on far greater legitimacy, and as a consequence they are more likely than diplomats to be seen as partners. Moreover, non-state actors do not have to juggle the competing agendas of their governments and have already become active in pursuing the public diplomacy goals of improving relationships, fostering mutual understanding and cushioning crises. In fact, these actors are often more effective in practising public diplomacy through their 'social diplomacy' than the diplomats themselves.

It is an enormous opportunity and challenge for Western governments to find a way to strengthen their public diplomacy through these social diplomatic activities. It is also crucial that non-state actors do not lose the foundation of their more suitable public diplomacy position: their independence. In making the two approaches complementary, the lessons of transnational advocacy networks are useful. Their experience shows that relations-centred multi-hub networks can marry the two and guarantee their independence from one another. Networks can guarantee the independence of actors who become part of them, yet manage to share information, foster exchange, and allow for the co-creation and co-implementation of a message, narrative, identity and strategy in the process. Actors who are willing to move forward together on similar rules of engagement can do so, and while there is no dominance over the network, state or non-state actors can acquire powerful hub positions that increase their impact on the network. This model has proven successful in international campaigns and interconnected spheres such as the European Union.

But the MENA region is not comparable to the interconnectedness of TANs or the European Union. The model therefore has to be customized to the specifics of the region, and actually to the specifics of the very different countries within the region. The MENA region displays a wide variety of different state systems and varying levels of freedom, which are currently being challenged. This paper has taken a very modest first step to attempt to explore customization of the public and social diplomacy model to countries in the region. Factors including history, stakeholders, the challenges and opportunities of public and/or social diplomacy all need to be taken into account to tailor-make the most effective approach. These customized approaches are explored because they are more needed today than ever before. The MENA region is facing drastic changes that hold incredible opportunities for Western governments. The shared values of Western governments and the people in the region are more openly aligned than ever before and Western governments are struggling with how to respond. There is fertile ground to improve relationships, but Western governments are not always willing or able to invest in this wholeheartedly. The willingness cannot be changed by any public diplomacy strategy, but Western governments are capable of practising public diplomacy when their hands are tied. Through facilitating social diplomacy activities, they can fulfil their duties in the diplomatic sphere and still support people on the ground from an arm's length without becoming detrimental to the cause.

This paper shows that diplomats cannot always do it all. There is a need to accept a number of the important limitations to their simultaneous functioning as diplomats and as public diplomacy actors in the MENA region. Diplomats are not always the most suitable actors for the task. Partnerships with other actors who are able to fulfil this function are crucial for improving relationships with people in the region, but translating the ideal of combining public with social diplomacy into practice demands a tailor-made country-specific approach. With the current exceptional circumstances in the MENA region, the window of opportunity has never been greater for improving relationships, and Western governments cannot afford not to act. Since their diplomats' hands remain largely tied in the public diplomacy realm, it is time to take the role of non-state actors more seriously. Public diplomacy strategies cannot afford to stand still while the winds of change are sweeping through the MENA region.

Policy Recommendations

- When the goals are to foster mutual understanding and improve relationships, the most effective public diplomacy is the one that is able to move beyond the diplomat and beyond national interests—that is, the most effective strategy is being able to draw on legitimacy and to serve shared interests.

- The crucial step between soft power resources and actual attraction has to be prioritized. Socialization is crucial because public diplomacy can only have an effect when there is some susceptibility in a foreign public. Socialization can only be built by gaining trust and legitimacy by following the five rules: pay attention to the perceived intent of the initiative; pursue shared interests; use dialogue; allow space for dissenting voices; and propose collective ownership of the initiative.
- Trust and legitimacy come by foot and go on horseback. Be aware that there is a long walk to go before there is any direct pay-off. Ensure a long-term horizon to public diplomacy.
- Acknowledge and accept the limitations that diplomats have in general, and in particular in the MENA region, and look for ways in which to compensate for these limitations.
- Capitalize on the opportunities that non-state actors offer in fulfilling the relationship-building component of public diplomacy. Incorporate the effective social diplomacy activities of non-state actors in a public diplomacy strategy.
- Public and social diplomacy can go hand in hand when their independence is guaranteed. One proposed way of doing so is through a multi-hub network structure wherein actors are free to decide the form and intensity of engagement.
- Make sure that public and social diplomacy has an inclusive character; actors beyond the usual suspects are important and as far as circumstances allow it there needs to be an honest effort for their participation in any effort to engage a broader range of a foreign public.
- Governments have to tailor-make their public diplomacy strategy to the specific context and country that they are facing. These different specifics demand an approach in which the balance between public and social diplomacy has to be customized to the situation.
- Acknowledging the limitations of diplomats does not nullify the need to have diplomats speak out openly on behalf of the values and principles that are shared with a foreign population.

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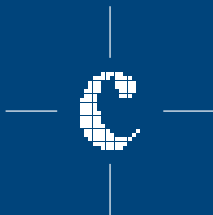
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Clingendael Paper No. 4

As the winds of change sweep through the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Western governments need to reconsider their public diplomacy strategies in order to jump through this window of opportunity and improve their relationships with the people, not just with governing elites and their associates.

This Clingendael Paper aims to contribute to this goal by addressing the challenges and opportunities for Western countries in the light of current fundamental shifts. For public diplomacy to be legitimate and effective, the paper argues, it has to serve a broader purpose than narrow national interests. This has become most apparent in the Arab world, where the West needs public diplomacy most but where it finds it hardest to pursue. Meanwhile, new actors, most notably from civil society, have emerged on the scene. They have proven much more effective in fostering relationships, containing crises and improving mutual understanding in a process that can be called social diplomacy. This paper takes the first steps in combining public and social diplomacy approaches in a customized approach to the MENA region, as much by conceptual clarification as by making recommendations for Western governments.

Rianne van Doeveren has undertaken research on the social diplomacy approach, in particular related to challenges and opportunities in the Arab world, during her time as a research fellow at the Clingendael Institute. Before joining the Clingendael Institute, she gained experience as an intern with grassroots NGOs in Israel/the Palestinian Territories and Lebanon. She is currently working as a management trainee, but continues to develop further her research into public diplomacy and the Arab world.