Commentary

Public diplomacy in Afro–Arab relations

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Governments always attempt to communicate with foreign public to export their ideas, institutions, culture, national goals and current policies. Public diplomacy is the effort of one nation to influence public of the other nation for the purpose of influencing foreign policy. The role of Public Diplomacy cannot be undervalued during regional integration. A country's public diplomacy including sports diplomacy and cultural diplomacy is only as effective as the policies behind it helping build bridges between nations. Efforts at promoting co-operation and solidarity among Third World countries have their

origins as far back as the Bandung Conference in April 1955, which proclaimed a community and identity of interests among African and Asian countries. Each region is different so is the patterns of regional agreements. Various regional integration organizations such as the Association of South East Asian Nations, the Andean Pact, the Central American Common Market, the Organization of African Unity, the Central African Economic and Customs Union, the Economic Community of West African States, and the Arab League, Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries tend to be limited to countries that are geographically contiguous and have similar historical, social, cultural and linguistic characteristics. A departure from this general feature is the co-operation between African and Arab countries, which became institutionalized in 1977. The Nile lands, made up of Egypt and Sudan; and the West (Al Maghreb), constituted by the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco and Mauritania are geographically located in Africa, thereby providing a distinct link and basis of co-operation between Africa and the Arab countries. More than the Arab world, the countries of Africa are fragmented along ethnic, linguistic, cultural and political lines, and the history and nature of their ties with the Arab world differ. Given these differences in both the Arab and the African regions, it is difficult to generalize Afro-Arab relations. Countries from both the regions have been linked economically and culturally for at least twelve centuries. For many years, increased tension in Africa and in the Middle East has questioned the relationships between the Arabs and Africa. The contacts between Arabs and Africans therefore accelerated by several centuries the arrival of Western colonial rule. An enduring result of the early contacts between Arabs and Africans was the spread of Islam, in Africa. Developments in Egypt were particularly important for Afro-Arab relations. Both Africa and Arab world are connected by economic, political and military links. Relations between Africa and the Arab world got off to a bad start in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Afro-Arab political co-operation was limited in scope, being restricted to the struggle against Israel and racism and colonialism in southern Africa. In the 1960s, conventions were signed between African and Arab countries covering wide areas, such as commerce, technical co-operation and financial aid. In both the economic and the political domains, the Afro-Arab summit conference in March 1977 represented a move away from ad hoc to institutionalized Afro-Arab co-operation. In that sense, therefore, one phase of Afro-Arab relations ended and a new one began.

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Institutional weakness has been widely documented as a notable problem in Africa and the Middle East. In the past, they have built this alliance into a comprehensive political partnership, aimed at maintaining a solid front, with regard to the Middle East and Southern Africa. The relationship between Arabs and Africans has always been largely asymmetrical where the Middle East had been the donor, and Africa the receiver. Throughout the history of their involvement in Africa, the Arabs have been both conquerors and liberators, both slave traders and provider of new ideas. The key question that needs to be focused is whether the Arabs will also become partners in African development. The weakness of African institutions has become a significant issue primarily because the difficulty of realizing the benefits of development programs and projects, especially those funded by bilateral and multilateral forums, has been blamed on underdeveloped and inefficient institutions in most African countries. In order for African countries to succeed in the development process, appropriate institutions based on democratic values need to be established in their countries that will contribute to development and improved governance. There is need for coherence and collaborative efforts on the part of donors in helping African countries in democratization. The foreign policies of Middle Eastern states are guided by various and complex motivations. These factors depend on history, geography, domestic factors, regional alliances, or Western influence as they do to the conflict with Israel. The Middle East media universe has expanded and become more sophisticated in ways that affect Arabs and others. Twitter, Facebook, You Tube etc. are useful, but only in limited ways. Their content is too small and too superficial to be heavily relied upon in building and maintaining global friendships. By developing a comprehensive media strategy that takes full advantage of new technologies and tools such as social media, proponents of public diplomacy may finally be able to shape constructive and supportive policies toward the Arab world.

In case of Middle East, international diplomats have been endeavoring to find a peaceful solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for decades. A majority of Iraqis credit America for their liberation from the tyranny of Saddam Hussein, for bringing democracy, free elections and freedom of the press, for instituting multi-party politics, and for creating the opportunity for the people to approve their own constitution through a plebiscite. This process of transformation has already begun. The Lebanese revolution is an offshoot of the political changes that have taken place in Iraq;

Egypt's call for multi–political parties to participate in the Presidential election is a consequence of the free elections that took place in Iraq on 28 January 2005. The failures of development in these countries for the last few decades have been failures to export the ideas which are function of public diplomacy.

Public diplomacy can bring about favorable social changes among the people in Africa and the Middle East, and a new attitude can develop. The new dynamics of the Arab world require a meaningful shift in public diplomacy strategy, with less emphasis on advertising and more on service sector. A strong public diplomacy initiative could improve the perception of these countries around the world. There are various ways in which public diplomacy initiatives have been applied in East African Community's (EAC) regional integration. The decision to integrate will naturally have significant consequences for economic activities, employment, education, conflict management etc. at the community. The Community needs to continue working at its own pace. Public diplomacy fosters regional integration by trying to influence foreign nationals and the public with values, policies and actions of their governments to be supported. Effective public diplomacy requires that public diplomacy strategies to move from monologue to dialogue, and even more, to collaboration. Public diplomacy, matters today more than ever, it establishes a country's position not only in the host country but in the world at large. As the saying goes, in the past, diplomacy has been with the leaders, but now it must be with the people.

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Conflict of interest

Author declares there is no conflict of interest.