

Middle East Public Opinion on the American Dream After Afghanistan

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Brief Analysis

After two decades of decline for America's world image, the disastrous withdrawal from Afghanistan will alter Middle East perspectives about American promise and dominance.

The scenes of Afghan officials fleeing from Kabul, as well as Afghans crowding the Kabul airport and running behind American military planes or falling from them reverberated heavily across the world, but made a particular impression in the Middle East.

The message sent by the Taliban seizing thousands of American military weapons, combined with images of joyful Taliban fighters wandering and having fun inside the palaces of Afghan officials, is more poignant to viewers in the Middle East than anything they might glean from dozens of Hollywood films or messaging campaigns financed by the U.S. government. Conversely, all the Chinese, Russian, and Iranian propaganda machines, even had they been working in tandem, have not been able to develop such an effective public relations campaign to destroy American credibility, or left such deep scars among those in the Middle East looking towards American values.

America's Waning Soft Power

Years ago, my daughter—who had come to work with me at a market research firm—asked me to explain the meaning of 'brand image.' I explained it as the soft power of any brand, the impression that becomes stuck in the consumer's mind and influences their decisions. Like commodities, countries also have political brand names in the minds of their own nationals on the one hand and the minds of the peoples of the world on the other.

In light of globalization, the importance of this kind of soft power has major implications, and may match or offset

countries' military capabilities. There are countries such as America with a superiority in hard and soft power, while other countries excel at only one. America in particular had accumulated a tremendous amount of soft power from the previous century, arguably becoming the first global brand; the term 'American dream' became a common expression in social and political literature worldwide, regardless of its reflection of facts on the ground.

In both the Middle East and in the broader world, many dreamed of either emigrating to America or imitating its economic and political model. In turn, America has benefited from its soft power on multiple levels—economic, political, and social. American goods are promoted not only for their quality, but because they are “made in America,” and the American economy has benefited greatly from everyone, as both the poorest minds and the biggest businessmen in the world have the impression that America is the land of dreams.

Even in the field of political and social values and standards, countries that have a strong political brand have become an example for other countries to follow. When the Soviet Union fell, previous socialist countries sought to adopt liberal democratic systems close to the American and Western models. Many Americans also accept the notion that the United States is the best possible country to live in. Whether or not this claim is correct is immaterial—the belief itself is what helps fuel American soft power.

Yet an erosion of this soft power has already been visible for decades, driven particularly by a series of U.S. actions in the Middle East. Despite a recovery from a dip in the opinion of America after its defeat in Vietnam, the last two decades have witnessed a continuous erosion of American soft power as a result of major events in which American policy has proven a catastrophic failure. This period began with the invasion of Iraq in 2003, but has continued through the fight against ISIS in Iraq, Syria, the Trump era—notably its mismanagement of the coronavirus crisis—and now the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

During the past decade, according to **[trend surveys \(https://news.gallup.com/poll/316133/leadership-remains-unpopular-worldwide.aspx\)](https://news.gallup.com/poll/316133/leadership-remains-unpopular-worldwide.aspx)** conducted by the Gallup Corporation poll in 132 countries around the world, the positive evaluation of America's leading role internationally fell from about 50% in 2009 to 33% in 2019—reaching a low point of 30% in 2017, with the biggest losses occurring in Europe and Asia.

When Biden entered the White House at the beginning of this year, optimism about the new administration fueled a significant improvement in the image of America in the eyes of twelve major industrialized partner countries according to **[a Pew Research Institute poll \(https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/06/10/americas-image-abroad-rebounds-with-transition-from-trump-to-biden/\)](https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/06/10/americas-image-abroad-rebounds-with-transition-from-trump-to-biden/)**, yet perceptions of the U.S. role in the world have continued to decline since. Americans themselves also perceive this shift; in a separate **[Gallup poll \(https://news.gallup.com/poll/116350/position-world.aspx\)](https://news.gallup.com/poll/116350/position-world.aspx)**, only 37% of Americans expressed satisfaction with the image of America in the world, compared to 71% in 2001.

This continuous erosion of the U.S. political brand name internationally has not only affected its declining global influence, it has also threatened the regional network of political relations that it built over the past decades in the Middle East—one of the most important elements of its soft power, compared to its direct competitors China and Russia. It is also negatively impacting the regional valuation of the basic American values that US foreign policy has always defended and tried to promote, most notably democracy.

Although it is important to note that the majority of those polled by the world values survey in the Middle East still see the adoption of democracy as important, the general trend of public opinion on this issue has clearly decreased over the past decade since the outbreak of the Arab Spring revolutions. With the exception of Iran—the percentage of those who rank the value of democracy highly **[has uniformly decreased \(https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp\)](https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp)**, whether in Iraq, Jordan, Tunisia, Lebanon, Egypt, or Turkey.

Importance of democracy

	Polled 2005-2013	Polled 2018-2021
Egypt	94%	75%
Jordan	90%	80%
Iran	74%	66%
Iraq	77%	62%
Lebanon	75%	71%
Tunisia	76%	71%
Turkey	92%	71%

(/sites/default/files/2021-08/democracy%20table.png)

Source: <https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>

<https://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSONline.jsp>

(Percentage of respondents who ranked importance of democracy 7 or above on a 10 point scale)

In my own county of Iraq, for example, not only did the percentage of those who believe in democracy decline, but the percentage of those who believe that democratic systems are not good at maintaining public order has jumped from 22% five years ago to about 45% now, according to the Arab indicator survey data. Those who want a “strong leader who does not have to bother with parliament or elections” has jumped from 17% in 2004 to 66% when polled in 2018, and those who see army rule as very or fairly good has likewise increased—from 14% to 47% during those years.

Though the majority of Americans (70%) **supported the withdrawal**

<https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/commentary-and-analysis/blogs/us-public-supports-withdrawal-afghanistan> from Afghanistan when polled by the Chicago Council on August 8, 2021, there is no doubt that

America's image has suffered a distortion that will prove difficult to restore, whether in the eyes of Americans or in the eyes of the world, especially since confidence in America has already been shaken. Americans also seem to recognize this; Biden's approval rating within the United States **sunk to 46%**

<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/biden-approval-drops-lowest-level-this-year-after-taliban-takeover-2021-08-17/> since the withdrawal from Afghanistan.

As such, America will have to come to terms with the impact of this withdrawal on international perceptions, especially those who have supported its interests in the Middle East. One of the most important principles of successful strategic communication is repetition of a message. It seems that America has applied this principle in reverse; this latest irresponsible withdrawal from Afghanistan appears to echo the similar withdrawals seen in Iraq and Syria, many years ago.

Given this pattern of withdrawals, the words of the Iranian diplomat whom I recently met in Baghdad have stuck with me. He bragged about the great difference between America's allies and Iran's allies in the region, telling me: look at Syria, which allied itself with Iran and was defended and supported until it defeated ISIS, and look at America's allies in Afghanistan who abandoned them and let them fall from its planes. This is likely a message that will increasingly resonate with others in the region as well. ❖

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