

David Pollock: A Retrospective

by [Catherine Cleveland \(/experts/catherine-cleveland\)](#)

Jan 11, 2024

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/rd-astdtkar-ldfyd-bwlwk\)](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Catherine Cleveland \(/experts/catherine-cleveland\)](#)

Catherine Cleveland is The Washington Institute's Croft-Wagner Family Fellow and editor of Fikra Forum.



Brief Analysis

David's endless optimism, insightful and entertaining anecdotes, and thoughtful comments on his colleagues' work were all defining features of his time at The Washington Institute. His mentorship will undoubtedly continue to inspire the dozens of young professionals who worked with him, continuing his legacy.

On January 10, longtime director of Fikra Forum David Pollock passed away (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/about/press-room/press-release/memoriam-dr-david-pollock>) at 73. David Pollock's career has been characterized by research driven by several enduring passions—including dialogue with and between the people of the Middle East, support for a better future for its people, and a love of the power of a shared language to build mutual respect and understanding. As with his previous tenure at the State Department, David Pollock's career at the Washington Institute exemplified his ability to intertwine these passions with a deep and serious scholarship that won him the respect and friendship of colleagues and policymakers both in Washington and the region. David's insight, vision, and leadership became the defining features of three major projects at The Washington Institute during his tenure as Director of Project Fikra—Fikra Forum, TWI public opinion polling, and The Washington Institute's presence in Arabic.

David Pollock arrived at The Washington Institute with a background in democracy promotion, public opinion, and dialogue building. Shortly thereafter, he was tasked with shepherding a then-nascent project—a bilingual pro-democracy blog featuring pieces on regional current events with a focus on local perspectives. Fikra Forum's beginning had been prescient; the first few articles emphasized Egyptians' deep dissatisfaction with Egypt's elections, held twelve days before the eruption of Arab Spring protests in Cairo. And as this movement unfolded across the region, authors began using this outlet to make shape of these moments of rupture and opportunity.

Under David Pollock's leadership since 2011, Fikra Forum has developed along with events in the Middle East—growing into a platform that has featured over 500 contributors from across the region and expanding its coverage to pressing issues of governance, economy, and regional relations from Algeria to Yemen. These contributors often became colleagues and friends, and he had no trouble finding eager hosts during his frequent travels there. Fikra Forum reflected his belief in the importance of an exchange of ideas, increasingly featuring authors whose access to English-only audiences had been limited and working to actively foster healthy debate about key governance issues from federalism in Lebanon to elections in the Kurdish Region of Iraq.

In the early 1990s, during a period when American policymakers were debating the utility of determining public opinion in the Arab World, David had argued that public opinion should not be written off among citizens of autocratic states, and that the knowledge of what populations—not just regional elites—thought of current events issues could lead to sometimes surprising realizations and policy insights.

To that end, David brought his experience conducting public opinion surveys to The Washington Institute—first providing analysis of extant polling, then drawing on his prior experience with the State Department to develop a polling program at The Washington Institute. During this period, and in prior visiting fellowships, David produced several monographs on the pitfalls and promises of public opinion polling in the Arab World. These include *The 'Arab Street'? Public Opinion in the Arab World* (1993), *Slippery Polls: Uses and Abuses of Opinion Surveys from Arab States* (2008), *A Nation Divided: Palestinian Views on War and Peace with Israel* (2020), alongside hundreds of articles analyzing the intersection between policy and public opinion in the Middle East.

Beginning in 2010, David Pollock supervised dozens of polls for The Washington Institute spanning populations from the Levant to the Gulf, which involved regular in-person meetings with regional polling companies to discuss methodological details and collaboration to ensure the best possible survey results. Through these polls, he captured attitudes on key current events and foreign policy issues relevant to U.S. policy in the Middle East and drew out insightful trends over time. His work repeatedly warned against the presentation of any public attitude as a monolith, especially in countries where national averages could mask deep divisions among different sub-national populations.

This polling, naturally, was conducted in Arabic. As an avid linguist, with both an insatiable interest in languages coupled with a modesty that belied how many languages he actually spoke, David frequently surprised and delighted guests by exchanging pleasantries in their language—including those Middle Eastern languages infrequently studied in the United States.

Arabic, however, was a particular and lifelong passion. Under David Pollock's leadership, the Arabic website team rapidly developed the site into a large compendium of Washington Institute scholars' research and helped create a blueprint for the Institute's later Persian language website. Most recently, the Arabic website launched video subtitling of key interviews and video products, further expanding The Washington Institute's dedication to Arabic content.

Underlying these efforts was David's mastery of Arabic and his commitment to be in conversation with many strains of political thought in the Arab World. To this end, David Pollock became a staple fixture for audiences of Sky News Arabia, al-Hadath, Orient TV, DW Arabic, al-Arabiya, al-Jazeera, al-Hurra, and other Arabic channels, where he debated a wide range of topics and helped translate American policy in the Middle East. Through these appearances, he engaged in dialogue and sometimes vigorous debate with co-interviewees from across the Arab world.

It would be remiss to mention David Pollock's significant contributions without discussing his presence as a colleague. David's endless optimism, insightful and entertaining anecdotes, and thoughtful comments on his colleagues' work were all defining features of his time at The Washington Institute. He also took the role of

mentoring the next generation of researchers on the Middle East extremely seriously, both through The Washington Institute's research assistants and interns and as a professor at several research institutions. David Pollock was endlessly encouraging of young researchers, whether they expressed interest in any of his areas of expertise or broached the possibility of writing in Fikra Forum. This mentorship will undoubtedly continue to inspire the dozens of young professionals who worked with him, continuing his legacy. ❖

RECOMMENDED



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Will the U.S.-British Strikes Stop the Houthi Attacks on Red Sea Shipping?](#)

Jan 12, 2024

◆
Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/will-us-british-strikes-stop-houthi-attacks-red-sea-shipping)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Badr and Asaib Crack the Whip on Kataib Al-Imam Ali in Basra](#)

Jan 11, 2024

◆
Ameer al-Kaabi,
Michael Knights

(/policy-analysis/badr-and-asaib-crack-whip-kataib-al-imam-ali-basra)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Kataib Hezbollah Reveals Plans for Expanded Regional Attacks](#)

Jan 11, 2024



Ameer al-Kaabi,
Hamdi Malik,
Michael Knights

(/policy-analysis/kataib-hezbollah-reveals-plans-expanded-regional-attacks)