

# A Skewed Look at Arab Hearts and Minds

by [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.



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## David Pollock reviews Shibley Telhami's book "The World through Arab Eyes: Arab Public Opinion and the Reshaping of the Middle East."

**T**elhami offers in *The World through Arab Eyes* a valuable if unavoidably imperfect attempt at illuminating the hearts and minds of the Arab world as revealed through public opinion polling. His book contains useful broad generalizations, revealing new data and intriguing ambiguities. But it also suffers from occasional problems: methodological flaws, unsupported or questionable single-sourced assertions, and strained interpretations that go beyond the available evidence. Arab public opinion polling as well as the analysis and policy debate surrounding it needs to be taken with a proverbial shaker of salt, a seasoning the author does not always apply.

On the positive side, the book provides interesting and well-organized survey data on certain broad major topics. Moreover, the author acknowledges the evidence that Arab public opinion has turned inward, toward domestic issues such as political freedoms and social justice. He also makes due allowances for the significant differences among and within diverse Arab publics.

In addition, the book offers numerous specific nuggets of information. It is interesting and important, for instance, to see that on average the Arab citizens of Israel are four times more likely to empathize with Jewish Holocaust victims than are Arabs in the six other countries polled: Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates. Or that those Arabs' popular dislike of the United States derives mostly from a rejection of its policies rather than its values -- and, more surprisingly, that this dislike actually has very little effect on Arab consumer preferences or behavior. Another important data point: On a weighted average, two-thirds of those in the six Arab countries polled would accept a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; only one-quarter say the Arabs should keep fighting Israel forever.

Equally surprising nuggets, but also plausible and useful, come from individual countries. In Saudi Arabia, the "most admired" foreign leader in 2011 was Saddam Hussein. In 2012 Egypt, two-thirds of those polled wanted Shari'a as the country's legal basis, but most (83 percent) preferred applying "the spirit of shari'ah but with adaptation to

modern times"; just 17 percent opted to apply it literally, "including the penal code (*hudud*)."

One problem, however, is that other recent polls show dramatically different results for very similar questions. The latest Pew poll from Egypt, to cite but one case, shows that 88 percent of Muslims there favored the death penalty for apostasy (see Neha Sahgal and Brian J. Grim, "[Egypt's Restrictions on Religion Coincide with Lack of Religious Tolerance \(http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/07/02/egypts-restrictions-on-religion-coincide-with-lack-of-religious-tolerance/\)](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/07/02/egypts-restrictions-on-religion-coincide-with-lack-of-religious-tolerance/)," July 2, 2013). This kind of discrepancy points to the problems in most contemporary Arab survey research -- whether by Pew or Telhami.

The book suffers from scattered methodological omissions as well. The first is simply the failure to spell out several important procedural approaches. Were all these surveys true probability samples, or were some based on quota or even merely "convenience" samples? If the former, what precisely were the methods adopted in each case -- multi-stage, stratified, geographic probability? Random walk? Household interview selection? Statistical/demographic weighting? If these were not all standard probability samples, how truly scientific or reliable are the resulting numbers? Regardless of sampling method, how much host government supervision, permission, or intimidation took place, which might have distorted the findings?

Some potentially revealing numbers are also missing from the narrative. For example, one poll cited produced the unlikely result, not replicated in others conducted by this reviewer, that Hugo Chavez was once the "most admired" foreign leader among Arabs. But did he get a rating of 60 percent, 20 percent, or some other percentage? It makes a big difference -- and in this and other instances, there is no telling from the text.

A different deficiency is in the choice of the countries surveyed and in the decision to stick with purely urban samples, which thereby excludes half or more of a country's total population. Thus, the book's samples hardly encompass all the Arab eyes of its title, and they completely omit crucial current developments in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia. Even in Egypt and other countries that are included, many of the most salient internal political issues are absent. As a result, the book has little to tell us about the great contest between the Islamist and the civil-military segments of society now underway in Egypt or about the prospects for stability or instability in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, or Jordan.

Too often the book treats all six Arab countries polled as a unit, which obscures rather than illuminates the vital differences among them. The averaged responses are weighted by population. Since Egypt has many more people than the other five countries combined, the findings are really a distorted reflection of Egyptian public opinion rather than a meaningful average of anything.

Another methodological problem is the occasional use of loaded questions on key issues. Some examples: "What aspect of al-Qaeda do you admire the most, if any?" "How important is the Palestinian issue to you?" -- instead of an open-ended question like "What issues are important to you?" Given the author's repeated and correct references to Arab aversion to international pressure, why ask: "There is international pressure on Iran to curtail its nuclear program. What is your opinion?" This preamble prejudices the findings by cuing the respondents in a particular direction.

Finally, the author largely neglects other readily available Arab polls that variously corroborate, qualify, or contradict the findings from his own fieldwork. Among the obvious candidates for inclusion would have been the Pew, Gallup, Charney, PIPA, Pechter, and many Palestinian and Israeli surveys on the topics in question. Given the particular constraints and vagaries of Arab polling, no single source can be credible. In certain important cases -- as on Arab attitudes toward Iran or toward selected American values -- the discrepancies among different pollsters are so significant that they demand detailed accounting and explanation.

In particular, other surveys taken in the two-and-a-half years since the beginning of the 2011 Arab uprisings

strongly suggest that most Arabs are now very heavily focused on their own internal issues -- and not on Americans, Israelis, Palestinians, or other Arabs. This is contrary to the book's overall leitmotif. Telhami interlaces the book with observations about Arab "dignity" and "the ever-present prism of pain," and he attempts to reassert the primacy of the Palestinian issue and resentment of U.S. policy therein. If there were actual empirical survey support for this, as opposed to mere anecdotes, fine. But the evidence is just not there -- not in the polls, not in the public squares, and not in the actual policies of Arab governments, revolutionary or otherwise. In 2011, as Telhami notes in passing, the Palestinian conflict ranked eighth out of eleven possible named priorities in an Egyptian poll -- and dead last in Tunisia. Yet the author is at pains to add that "there were other indications of [its] importance," without indicating what those are.

Even if he at times concedes that today's Arab politics and public opinion are "primarily" about domestic matters rather than foreign economic, social, and political affairs, Telhami spends little time considering the ramifications of this trend.

Telhami is among the most decent, thoughtful, knowledgeable, and balanced experts in this all-too-polarized intellectual arena. There is much to be learned from this book, despite its imperfections. Yet had the author considered the substantial and directly relevant work of others like him -- including mounds of complementary but occasionally quite contrary polling data -- the result would have been considerably more compelling. This narrow focus is a common and even an understandable academic failing but one that is relatively easily remedied. One keeps hoping that it will be -- another time.

*David Pollock is the Kaufman Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of Fikra Forum. His publications include the 2008 Institute study [Slippery Polls: Uses and Abuses of Opinion Surveys from Arab States](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/slippery-polls-uses-and-abuses-of-opinion-surveys-from-arab-states) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/slippery-polls-uses-and-abuses-of-opinion-surveys-from-arab-states>).* ❖

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