

Cairo and Counting

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Articles & Testimony

June 4 marked the first anniversary of President Barack Obama's speech in Cairo, which offered Arabs and Muslims around the world a new "engagement" with the United States. A year later, how do Arab publics see the results of that effort -- and how much do their views about it really matter?

One thing is very clear: compared to former President George W. Bush, Obama's personal popularity among most Arabs started out much higher and so far has generally stayed that way. The latest available survey data on this are from Pechter Middle East Polls, a young firm based in Princeton, New Jersey that partners with the most credible established local pollsters in each country. The results do vary considerably across the countries polled: Obama's approval ratings today range from a high of 45 percent in Lebanon to a low of 30 percent in Iraq and Jordan.

More specifically, some of these recent polls asked about particular US policies, with intriguing results. Remarkably, asked for "the most positive thing the US could do" in the region, economic support tied statistically with Arab-Israel issues among Egyptians (36 percent each) and Saudis (30 and 27 percent). In Jordan, US policies on Iraq, Guantanamo, democracy promotion and overall relations with Muslims received ratings of at least "somewhat credible" from around 30 percent in April 2010 -- little changed from those ratings in the immediate aftermath of Obama's speech in Cairo the previous spring. But the credibility of "US policy toward Arab-Israel peace" nearly doubled among Jordanians over the past year: from 21 percent right after the Cairo speech to 39 percent today.

Among West Bank/Gaza Palestinians, somewhat fewer (30 percent) say that the US seeks the creation of "an independent and viable Palestinian state," according to a US-government sponsored survey taken by a Palestinian pollster in mid-March. And a mere 20 percent are even "somewhat satisfied" with Washington's "current involvement in the Arab-Israel peace process" -- though that figure is up modestly from the corresponding numbers from the end of Bush's tenure (6 percent) or the end of Obama's first year in office (10 percent).

On Iran, another key issue for US policy in the region today, Arab attitudes are mixed. Pechter polls from November 2009 and March-April 2010 show solidly negative popular views both of Iran and of Mahmoud Ahmedinezhad in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Iraq -- including among Iraq's Shi'ite majority. The US push for tougher sanctions against Iran's nuclear program garners clear majority support from Saudis (57 percent), but smaller percentages in Egypt (43), Jordan (41) or Lebanon (39). As of late 2009, a third of Saudis were actually willing to say they would support an American military strike against Iran's nuclear program and a quarter of Egyptians said the same.

But how much does any of this matter? Not so much, according to the best available data. For one thing, the entire past decade's worth of survey research proves that Arab attitudes toward other important issues are largely unrelated to their views of the United States. This includes their attitudes toward al-Qaeda, suicide bombing, terrorism in general and even terrorism specifically directed against American civilians. Arab popular sympathy for any of those actions plummeted precipitously in almost every society polled after 2003-04, even as attitudes toward the US, its policies and its president remained heavily negative.

The timing strongly suggests the main reason for this shift. Opinion turned sharply and enduringly against terrorism immediately after a major terrorist bombing inside each country. This sea change in attitudes had everything to do with local incidents and almost nothing to do with the United States.

Related to this is a second, equally striking research finding: the US is just not that much on people's minds in the region. For example, in the November 2009 Pechter polls, Saudis and Egyptians were asked in an open-ended fashion to pinpoint the most important issue facing their country today. Two-thirds of Saudis cited economic problems even in that supposedly "oil rich" country: inflation (21 percent), corruption (18), unemployment (16), and poverty (11). No foreign policy issue made the list at all. The pattern in Egypt was similar. Economic concerns dominated the list: poverty (22 percent), inflation (15), unemployment (12) and corruption (10).

Even the usually tendentious Zogby polls have reported such findings when they posed this question of popular priorities in a similarly neutral way. Based on polls he conducted in six Arab states in 2002 and 2005, for instance, James Zogby concluded that "issues very close to home dominate the rankings, with 'family', 'work' and 'marriage' ranking numbers one, two and three. 'Political issues facing Arab nations', 'leisure time' and 'domestic political issues' remain at the bottom of the list."

Third, even when Arab publics have a poor impression of the US, they still tend to believe it is important for their own governments to have good ties with Washington. In Jordan, for instance, only one-quarter of the public reported a favorable opinion of the US in late 2009 -- but twice as many (53 percent) said Jordan should maintain good bilateral relations. Similarly, in Lebanon opinions on foreign policy are, as noted, highly polarized by that country's unique sectarian cleavages. Yet a majority (56 percent) of the total Lebanese population says their country should have good relations with the US, including a third who say they feel strongly that way.

Fourth, even if Arab publics did not want their governments to keep close ties with Washington, almost all of those governments would probably do so anyway. These are not, after all, the kind of full-fledged democracies in which public opinion determines foreign policy.

Fifth, finally, and most surprisingly of all: even when Arab attitudes toward the US were overwhelmingly negative, during the Bush years, Arab publics continued to travel to the US, to study in American schools and to buy American brands -- in record high numbers by 2008. Moreover, after the first two years of the Iraq war, the number of reported anti-American protests in the entire Arab region dwindled to almost nothing: an average of just two such protests per country each year from 2006 through 2009. These findings are analyzed in exhaustive detail in a study I just completed, appropriately entitled, *Actions, Not Just Attitudes: A New Paradigm for US-Arab Relations*. This does not mean that Arabs are hypocritical -- just human.

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