

Understanding 300 Million Arabs:

Attitudes vs. Actions

by [Mohamed Abdelbaky \(/experts/mohamed-abdelbaky\)](/experts/mohamed-abdelbaky), [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](/experts/david-pollock)

Oct 17, 2009

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Mohamed Abdelbaky \(/experts/mohamed-abdelbaky\)](/experts/mohamed-abdelbaky)

Mohamed Abdelbaky is a Keston visiting fellow for The Washington Institute's [Project Fikra \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms), focusing on economic and political reform, democracy, governance, and youth development in the Middle East. He is also a diplomatic correspondent covering Middle East and North Africa (MENA) affairs for the



[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.



In-Depth Reports

Download (<templateC04.php?CID=317>) the complete proceedings.

On October 17, 2009, Mohamed Abdelbaky, Nabeel Khoury, and David Pollock addressed The Washington Institute's annual Weinberg Founders Conference. Mohamed Abdelbaky is a Keston visiting fellow at The Washington Institute's [Project Fikra \(templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateI02.php?SID=24&newActiveSubNav=Project%20Fikra&activeSubNavLink=templateI02.php%3FSID%3D24&newActiveNav=researchPrograms), focusing on economic and political reform, democracy, governance, and youth development in the Middle East. Nabeel Khoury is director of the Office of Analysis for Near East and South Asia in the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research. David Pollock is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on public opinion and political dynamics in Middle Eastern countries.

The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

David Pollock

Conventional wisdom tells us that relations between the United States and the Arab world deteriorated under the Bush administration. Public opinion polling in the region supported this assertion. But polling in the Arab world is fraught with complications, and the results tell us nothing about how Arabs actually act on their opinions. These complexities have encouraged the development of a new means to assess Arab public opinion. In the Arab Behavioral Index, Arab actions are used to appraise the relationship between the United States and the Arab world at both the popular and official level. Specifically, the Index attempts to quantify the relationship using a variety of indicators and statistics. All of the statistics use the year 2000 as a baseline in order to chart changes between the pre- September 11 era and the present.

As with other statistical measures, the Index serves only to summarize events. There are certain gray areas or incidents that could not be directly quantified in the Index despite the substantial impact they may have had on U.S.-Arab relations. The Index's focus is not on these events, however, but on the day-to-day issues affecting the Arab world.

Analyzing the Index uncovers an interesting trend: relations between the United States and Arab countries have generally improved in the past decade despite opinion polling asserting the opposite. The Index supports this conclusion by treating the actual actions of Arabs in the region as more policy relevant than their rhetoric.

In terms of organization, the Index evaluates popular ties and official ties separately. The sections devoted to popular ties illustrate the changes in individual Arab actions related to the United States. These include statistics and ratios focusing on student ties, visa issuance, and consumption of U.S. goods. The student-ties ratio looks at the number of students from a given country who choose to study in the United States. Over the past decade, this ratio witnessed a modest increase. Similarly, the visa ratio looks at the number of U.S. visas issued to Arabs. Although this ratio dropped immediately following the events of 2001, the trend line increased steadily thereafter, finally

surpassing the 2000 figure last year. Lastly, the consumer-imports ratio measures the amount of U.S. consumer products purchased by Arabs. This ratio excludes large government purchases and is limited to products designed for individual consumption. Once again, the statistics show a large, steady increase in this figure. To delve more deeply into this phenomenon, an investigative poll was commissioned in Jordan and Egypt to see whether people were more or less likely to buy U.S. products. Only a small percentage reported that they would be less likely to buy U.S. products for political reasons; in fact, only about half of the population could identify U.S. products, with some even identifying fake products in the study as American. Overall, then, popular ties between the United States and the Arab world improved despite contrary expectations engendered by opinion polling.

The same trend was largely evident on the official side, albeit with one deviation. The Index sections devoted to official ties illustrate the changes in Arab government actions toward the United States on issues such as bilateral trade, arms delivery, and UN vote ratios. Both the bilateral trade and arms-delivery ratios showed a steady increase throughout the decade. Yet, the vote ratio -- which measures the coincidence of U.S. and Arab voting patterns in the UN -- witnessed a near-annual decline from 2000 to 2008.

The Washington Institute's Arab Anti-American Protest Database confirms the Index's overall findings by highlighting the recent decline in protest incidents. Chronicling anti-American demonstrations in the Arab world from 2000 to 2009, the database shows a large spike in protest activity in 2003 due to the U.S. invasion of Iraq, followed by a drop in the years since. Moreover, this project's new Arab Political and Economic Reform indices, based on the best expert assessments by nongovernmental organizations and international institutions such as the World Bank and Freedom House, show that in several Arab countries, the greatest progress toward reforms was registered precisely in those years when overall U.S. popularity dropped to record lows.

Going forward, Washington should inform its policymaking with analysis that focuses on Arab actions rather than just Arab attitudes. Although President Obama gave people in the region cause for excitement with his June 2009 Cairo speech, these sentiments have yet to register as tangible changes in the behavioral data. Such a shift will be the true test of whether Obama can change not only public opinion, but also public action toward the United States.

Mohamed Abdelbaky

Egyptian public opinion contradicts Egyptian actions. Even as polling results point to one conclusion, the actual behavior of the Egyptian people is usually the opposite. For example, despite relatively frequent anti-American protests and generally unfavorable sentiments in Egypt, students still deem the United States a desirable place to study. In 2005, some 84,000 Egyptian students received support from America-Mideast Educational and Training Services (AMIDEAST) to pursue studies in the United States. Even the Islamist-leaning al-Azhar University, a hotbed of anti-American sentiment, has had numerous applicants to such programs.

The Egyptian workforce exhibits similar tendencies. For example, the Qualified Industrial Zones (QIZs) project established industrial areas in Egypt that were permitted to enter the U.S. market free of tariffs so long as they included a certain percentage of Israeli inputs. Although they spurred a vast increase in trade, the zones were wildly unpopular in opinion polls: according to a 2005 Pew survey, some 70 percent of Egyptians opposed the initiative. Despite this seemingly overwhelming unpopularity, however, 24,000 Egyptians applied for jobs in the QIZs. At the official level, the Egyptian government has received public criticism for actions deemed to be supportive of U.S. policy. For example, when Egypt became the first Arab state to send an ambassador to postwar Iraq, only 38 percent of the public backed the decision.

Overall, then, Egyptian anti-Americanism operates under a unique dynamic: it is a sentiment, but not a movement. Egyptian attitudes toward the United States are mixed. The public vehemently opposes U.S. foreign policy, but it also desires the democratic reforms that the United States preaches. Attitudes and actions are not the same thing in Egypt. Although protests in the streets reflect dissatisfaction, these same Egyptian protestors want what the United States has to offer and hope to reap the benefits of a healthy relationship.

Nabeel Khoury

Attitudes toward U.S. policy shape Arab response and thus need to be fully analyzed. The Arab Behavioral Index (an analytical framework and data compilation project that The Washington Institute aims to unveil in the coming months) does an excellent job of seeking to understand the actions of individual Arabs and their governments. Although many view the West as being at odds with the Arab world, the underlying truth may be that most Arab regimes are in fact pro-American even as they oppose foreign policy. And at the popular level, many Arabs are in favor of support for civil and democratic reforms but reject Washington's unwavering support for Israel.

Yet, alongside these important insights, the Index makes some fundamental assumptions that may not necessarily be true. For example, the Index assumes that negative opinions should lead to negative behavior. When people express their disdain through protests or other public means, they are expressing their dislike toward certain aspects of U.S. policy -- in general, however, they still welcome the ideals of democracy and an active civil society. The groups that truly represent anti-Americanism in the region and pose an actual threat to the United States are the fringe jihadist groups that operate in secret and through violent means. These groups require some measure of popular support, however small, in order to operate. Although such support is waning, this trend is not necessarily tied to public sentiment toward the United States; rather, it is a function of the difficulty that jihadist groups have in establishing themselves within their societies

after the initial resistance phase. Therefore, even if poor public attitudes toward the United States do not directly change the Index's "popular ties" ratios, such sentiments could eventually garner more popular support for jihadist groups, which pose a far greater risk to U.S. policy interests than negative poll results.

For policymakers in Washington and elsewhere, the Index sends the message that public opinion does not matter. Yet, can indicators such as consumer trends really offer an adequate picture of Arab public opinion? Do U.S. policymakers really have no cause for worry so long as these trends remain positive? Washington would be wise to strike a more delicate balance, striving to understand not only what Arabs do, but also what they think. ❖

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Unpacking the UAE F-35 Negotiations](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Grant Rumley

(/policy-analysis/unpacking-uae-f-35-negotiations)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022



Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](#)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](#)

[U.S. Policy \(/policy-analysis/us-policy\)](#)