

# Obama in the Muslim World

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

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Makovsky \(/experts/david-makovsky\)](/experts/david-makovsky)

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow at The Washington Institute and director of the Koret Project on Arab-Israel Relations.



[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.



Articles & Testimony

On May 31, 2009, the Washington Post asked activists, journalists, and policy experts what the president should say in his address in Cairo. The Washington Institute's David Makovsky, the Ziegler distinguished fellow and coauthor of [Myths, Illusions and Peace: Finding a New Direction for America in the Middle East](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=310) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=310>), David Pollock, a senior fellow and author of [Slippery Polls: Uses and Abuses of Opinion Surveys From Arab States](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=290) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=290>), and Curtis Cannon, a Schusterman Young scholar, participated in this forum.

David Makovsky

I hope President Obama asks Arab and Muslim societies to look inward.

Candor requires acknowledging that too many Arab states have exploited the Arab-Israeli conflict for domestic purposes. These regimes have used the conflict to deflect criticism of their failings on domestic issues -- failings that could threaten their grasp on power. Too often Arab leaders justify the lack of political or economic reform by citing their preoccupation with the Arab-Israeli conflict. By so doing, they make others responsible for the solutions. Taken together, instead of producing a culture of responsibility, as President Obama has called for at home, they perpetuate a culture of victimhood.

Arab states need to do their share to end the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although some Arabs say they need to deal with Israel because it is a fact, they never say they should do so because Israel is a legitimate state. If the Arab world wants the United States to become more engaged in Arab-Israeli peacemaking, it needs to do more than present a back-loaded Arab Peace Initiative. I hope Obama says to them: every step that Israel takes toward the Palestinians must be met with an Arab step to integrate Israel into the Middle East.

David Pollock and Curtis Cannon

President Obama's speech is being heralded as another harbinger of improved relations between the United States and the "Arab world." Indeed, according to the handful of polls available around the region, America's overall approval rating in various Arab countries plummeted to the teens during the Bush administration. By contrast, in recent Zogby and IPSOS polls, half or more in Morocco, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (but not in Egypt or Lebanon) agreed that "the Obama administration will bring positive change to U.S.-Arab relations." But does this matter?

In spite of what the Arab polls say, the United States has not been nearly as negatively affected by its poor image as is commonly supposed. Since 2003, the number of protests with any reported anti-American slant has slowed to a trickle. The number of Arab citizens granted visas to visit the United States has been steadily increasing since 2003. U.S. exports to Arab countries have boomed, from \$16.3 billion in 2000 to \$51.8 billion in 2008. And Arab governments have been increasingly cooperative with the United States over the past five years.

It would be nice if more Arabs liked the United States. But as Obama drafts his speech, he should be mindful that, of the two pillars for U.S.-Muslim relations proposed in his speeches so far, the record demonstrates that "mutual interests" clearly matter much more than "mutual respect." ❖

Washington Post

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