

Assessing What Arabs Do, Not What They Say

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Brief Analysis

On July 25, 2006, Robert Satloff and David Pollock addressed The Washington Institute's Special Policy Forum. Dr. Satloff is the executive director of The Washington Institute and the author most recently of the Institute monograph [Assessing What Arabs Do, Not What They Say: A New Approach to Understanding Arab Anti-Americanism \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=244\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=244). Dr. David Pollock, formerly head of Near East research in the U.S. Information Agency, currently works in the Office of the Undersecretary of Global Affairs at the Department of State. His remarks were off the record. The following is a rapporteur's summary of Dr. Satloff's remarks.

Polls have become the lens through which observers try to understand Arab public opinion. Experts use the results to predict what action will follow from certain attitudes. This leap has analysts ascribing behavioral implications to attitudinal studies, but there is great reason to be suspicious of public opinion polling. Polls can be flawed in design, implementation, and in their use as an analytical tool to understand Arab politics. Another major critique of polls in the Middle East is that they do not account for the reality that this is a region of diversity in ethnicity, language, religion, and politics. As such, polls should not be the only yardstick to measure public opinion. Before there were pollsters, analysts and observers focused on what people actually did, rather than what they said.

This study, which assesses how often and in what numbers Arabs engage in public protest, is one attempt to assess behavior rather than attitudes. Though using public protest is not a perfect method, it is one piece of the puzzle that attempts to reveal preferences Arabs may have with regard to the United States. Naturally, governments play a role in this process, sometimes pushing people into the streets and sometimes keeping them away. However, such government intervention is a fact of life in all sorts of assessments of public opinion and is no less a factor in assessing polling data.

The Arab Anti-American Protest Database was compiled to examine public protests in Arab countries beginning in January 2000 and continuing through December 2005. Protests were drawn from media-reported protests, which had to have been reported in two reputable news outlets. Of these, one had to be a Western source, and the other could have been either a Western or an Arab source. A high standard was set for inclusion in the database, and analysis focused more on objective observations (place, time, setting) than on subjective observations (what triggered the protest). Anti-American protests are defined as those in which protesters expressed criticism of the

U.S. government, U.S. policies, or the United States.

Of the 538 total protests, the vast majority occurred in the Levant (including Egypt). Roughly one-third took place in the Gulf, and only one in twenty-five were in North Africa. Iraq had more protests than any other country, Egypt was second, and Israel/West Bank/Gaza was third. The countries with the fewest protests were mixed in terms of size and location: Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Kuwait, and the UAE. In terms of per capita protests, Bahrain had the most, followed by Lebanon and Jordan. In Bahrain, the number of protests was small in absolute terms, but relative to population they were frequent and fairly large, which raises disturbing questions about what is going on in the home of the U.S. Fifth Fleet. The lowest number of protests per capita took place in Morocco, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Algeria, which is not always in line with polling data. In Morocco, for example, polls indicate rabid anti-Americanism, but the number of public protests is essentially negligible.

When laid out month by month, one sees a generally low level of protests with a handful of spikes, going down as quickly as they go up. In 2003, there was a huge rise in protests with the American-led invasion of Iraq, but the results from 2005 are effectively the same as those from 2000. Though there are spikes at key moments, protests tend to remain at a consistently low level.

Only a small percentage of protests attracted large numbers. Indeed, just 14 percent gathered 10,000 people or more. If one were to ask what triggers protests, most experts in the United States would likely proffer events like the revelations of abuses at Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay. However, unsanctioned U.S. policy or actions account for only 2 percent of protests during the period under consideration. The majority were triggered by things Washington takes credit for. In addition, roughly 20 percent came in response to Israeli actions, for which the United States is deemed culpable. Certainly if protests are sponsored by governments, they are not taking advantage of developments like Abu Ghraib to send people into the streets.

Protests tend to focus inward, much more so than in the past. What motivates people today is what is happening internally. At the same time, there is still a reasonable reflection of response to big events. People are still protesting on certain issues of foreign policy.

One interesting observation is that countries that are adversaries of the United States -- such as Syria -- where one might think the government would support anti-U.S. protests are not the countries with the highest number of protest in absolute or in per capita terms. American allies (Bahrain, Jordan, and Lebanon) actually have more protests per capita than states where one expects governments to be able to turn protests on and off. Overall, the level of violence in all protests is extremely low. Deaths occurred only 5 percent of the time. There was some symbolic violence, but the vast majority of protests were nonviolent.

Conclusions

From these results, six main conclusions can be drawn:

- (1) The number of protests in Arab countries is low by almost any standard.
- (2) Incidents were almost exclusively driven by the news cycle. There is no continually rising tide of popular protests.
- (3) Not all Arabs are the same. Proximity matters. It is no surprise that Iraqis and Palestinians engaged in a greater number of protests than other Arabs. With respect to Bahrain and Lebanon, one might consider the large Shiite populations as playing a role.
- (4) Incidents were generally nonviolent. In 1986, when the United States bombed Libya, four U.S. installations were bombed in the Middle East. When the United States went so far as to invade an Arab capital in 2003, only three installations were attacked, and the events were over quickly.

(5) Over the six-year period of study, there has been little significant change in the size, nature, or violence of protests. One does not see a rising tide.

(6) No correlation exists between the frequency of incidents and the political alignment of the governments involved.

In addition to these conclusions, two modest policy prescriptions can be offered:

(1) Given how this research is at such odds with conventional wisdom, as fueled by polling data, it is essential to invest more effort on behavior -- on what Arabs do and not just what they say.

(2) Until conclusive judgments can be made about real levels of anti-Americanism in Arab countries and what the practical political impact of those levels of anti-Americanism are, policymakers should not jump to policy prescriptions based upon poll-driven perceptions of frenzied, rabid anti-Americanism.

This study does not suggest that everything is fine between the United States and Arabs, but a great deal more research must be done before making policy regarding Arab anti-Americanism. Most Arabs do not wake up in the morning thinking about the United States; it is not the motivating issue in their lives. There are occasions, like the invasion of Iraq, when people have very strong opinions, but from day to day, most people are concerned with their own local and personal situations. For Palestinians or Iraqis, American policy is very much a part of their everyday reality, but that it not the case for the majority of Arabs. Ultimately, more must be done to assess what Arabs do rather than simply what they say.

Institute research assistant Nathan Hodson prepared this rapporteur's summary. ❖

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