Survey Says:

Polls and the Muslim World

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Articles & Testimony

The inaugural Middle East tour of Karen Hughes, America's chief public diplomat, has occasioned yet another round of hand-wringing over the crisis of Arab anti-Americanism. Reuters explained that "the sagging American image abroad needed a facelift," while The Christian Science Monitor predicted that Hughes "won't have to listen too closely to hear the widespread anger over perceived U.S. arrogance and heavy-handedness." At the same time, the just-leaked findings of the congressionally mandated Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy state bluntly that "America's image and reputation abroad could hardly be worse." None of this comes as much of a surprise. After all, everyone accepts that America is widely loathed in the Arab world.

And yet it's worth asking: Is it true? The assumption that Arabs are enraged at America relies heavily on a single-source polling data. But there are two major problems with polls of Arab public opinion: the way those polls are generally reported; and the accuracy of the polls themselves. The indefatigable Israeli politician Shimon Peres once famously said that polls are like perfume--beautiful to smell, deadly to drink. At least where contemporary polls of Arab and Muslim public opinion are concerned, he was on to something.

For an example of the first problem, take the widely cited Pew Global Attitudes Survey. Guided by a stellar group of renowned statesmen and academic experts, the "Pew polls," as they are known, are regarded as the gold standard of international public opinion measurements.

One of Pew's most newsworthy polls was its March 2004 survey, "A Year After Iraq War: Mistrust of America in Europe Ever Higher; Muslim Anger Persists." The press advisory that accompanied the survey results highlighted a deepening divide between the United States and Muslim societies, a charge that was picked up in Cassandra-like headlines in newspapers across the country.

Evidently few reporters took the time to read the fine print in the poll itself. If they did, they would have found that the poll provided absolutely no evidence to support the charge that "Muslim anger persists." In fact, the word "anger" did not appear in a single poll question. Muslims did give high "unfavorable" ratings to the United States, but there is considerable difference between viewing something unfavorably and being angry at it. (Think of broccoli or Britney Spears.) Pew evidently recognized how problematic this was; in the 2005 version of the Global Attitudes Survey, released in June, references to such sensationalist (and unsubstantiated) terms as "anger" were nowhere to be found. But the damage was already done.

Pew's general pattern has been to downplay results that suggest America's standing is less bleak than commonly assumed. In 2004, for example, one question found that--in contrast to Europeans--Arabs and Muslims overwhelmingly endorsed America's role as the world's sole superpower, with huge majorities saying that international security would be endangered by the emergence of a global competitor to the United States. The press advisory made no mention of this. Similarly, the advisory avoided the fact that in three of four Muslim countries polled, there was a significant increase in the number of respondents who gave the United States a passing grade--

that is, "excellent," "good," or "only fair"--for its performance in Iraq compared to the previous year's poll; in only one country, Turkey, did the percentage characterizing America's performance as "poor" rise, and that was just 2 percent. In Pew's summary of the 2005 survey, there is scant reference to a remarkable set of positive trends: Compared to previous results, all Muslim countries polled had a less critical image of President Bush; a more favorable view of the United States (here again, Turkey was the sole exception); a stronger sense that America truly favors democracy in their country; and a greater receptivity to implementing Western-style democracy. That certainly runs against the common wisdom regarding the political attitudes of Arabs and Muslims.

Aside from flaws in how these poll results are reported, there are structural factors that can chip away at the fundamental validity of polling in many Arab countries. These problems flow primarily from the difference between liberal democracies and the controlled authoritarian states that prevail in much of the Middle East. For example, should we take at face value data from countries where freedom of speech is highly circumscribed or where the populace has no experience in answering provocative questions from strange people promising to keep the replies secret? And shouldn't we look twice at results from countries whose rulers have an interest in Washington continuing to fear an allegedly outraged anti-American populace?

Then there is the less sinister problem of language. Polls in Arab countries are almost always done in Arabic, despite the fact that about one-quarter of the citizens of these countries--including Berbers, Kurds, Turcomans, Sudanese animists, and others--are not Arab and may not speak Arabic as their first language. Ask a Moroccan the same question in Arabic and a Berber dialect, for example, and there is a good chance of getting different results--for the simple reason that talking in each language is itself a political statement, with local, national, and international implications.

Lastly, there is the issue of sample. Pew pollsters, for instance, are able to work in four countries that alone represent about forty percent of all Muslims--the world's two most populous Muslim countries (Indonesia and Pakistan) and two with the world's largest Muslim minorities (China and India). In contrast, Pew operates in just three Arab countries (Morocco, Jordan, Lebanon) whose population amounts to less than 15 percent of all Arab states combined; importantly, none are among the region's political heavyweights and none are in the Gulf. One simply can't discern general trends about Arab public opinion from polls based on such a small and geographically skewed sample.

None of this suggests that all surveys of Arab opinion are bad. Undertaken professionally and disseminated dispassionately, they have a useful role to play in shaping understanding of Arab political dynamics. But a singular reliance on professed Arab attitudes--what Arab publics say--should not be enough. At the very least, this process ought to be complemented by a thorough assessment of what Arab publics do. This is the old fashioned method. In the pre-polling era, there were two reliable measures of anti-Americanism: state action (such as the Arab oil embargo) and mass action (especially street protests). Boycotts of high-profile American goods or companies cut across these two categories, as sometimes they represent decisions of government or state enterprises and at other times they reflect the collective action of thousands of individual consumers.

Using these indicators, the situation does not appear quite so dire. On the state level, it's business as usual, and then some. Although Arab petroleum exporters could choke our economy by turning off the spigot, they appear more interested in reaping the gains of high prices. One after another, Muslim leaders are lining up to sign free-trade agreements with the United States and to shake the hand of Israel's leader at the United Nations. It doesn't look like many are fearful of anti-American backlashes at home.

On the mass level, the famed "Arab street" is largely inactive. Despite the high number of civilian deaths in Iraq, it is extremely rare for Arabs to gather in large numbers to protest the U.S. occupation. Indeed, the largest Arab protest this year--the Lebanese demonstration demanding the withdrawal of Syrian forces--was decidedly pro-American.

At the same time, recent Arab boycotts of high-profile American companies--if they had any traction at all--were short-lived and ultimately ineffective. McDonald's sales in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa did fall in 2003, when U.S.-led forces invaded Iraq, but have rebounded strongly ever since. Even Caterpillar, under pressure for doing business with the Israel Defense Forces, appears to turn a handsome profit in the Middle East, with revenues for its division that include Arab countries up 50 percent in the past two years.

To be sure, none of this is proof that all is well in America's relations with Arab publics. But the truth of the situation is far more nuanced than the commonly held image of a region in which millions of Arabs rush out of bed each day to burn effigies of Uncle Sam before their morning coffee. The prime mission of post-9/11 public diplomacy is identifying, nurturing, and supporting Muslim allies in the ideological battle against radical Islamist extremism. That task is difficult--yet doable. But it will only seem impossible if we guzzle every fragrance in the department store.

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