

Anti-Americanism:

Due to What the U.S. Is or What the U.S. Does?

by [Barry Rubin \(/experts/barry-rubin\)](/experts/barry-rubin)

Dec 2, 2003

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Barry Rubin \(/experts/barry-rubin\)](/experts/barry-rubin)

Barry Rubin was a senior fellow at the Institute from 1988-1993 and a visiting fellow frequently thereafter. He passed at the age of 64 in February 2014.



Brief Analysis

S HIBLEY TELHAMI

There is no clear-cut answer to the question of whether anti-Americanism is rooted in the identity or the policies of the United States. First, the Middle East must be placed in a global context. Although attitudes toward the United States are at an all-time low in Arab and Muslim countries after declining rapidly in recent years, this trend is also occurring globally. Anti-Americanism is thus not unique to Arab or Muslim society, culture, values, or politics. What is certain, however, is that anti-Americanism is more intense in Arab and Muslim countries, and consequently results in violence that is not seen elsewhere. The key task, then, is to determine the causes of this heightened brand of anti-Americanism.

Hostile Arab and Muslim attitudes toward the United States stem from a broad range of sources. Groups such as al-Qaeda and its supporters are hostile because of ideological concerns, not U.S. policies. These radicals want to establish puritanical Islamic states, and they see the United States as the anchor of the system they want to topple. Their motivation is not specifically related to policy issues such as the Arab-Israeli conflict. The motivations behind public opinion are quite different, however. In the past, Arab and Muslim popular perceptions of the United States were often positive, turning negative only after specific policy developments. For example, in a State Department poll conducted only weeks before the July 2000 Camp David summit, more than 60 percent of respondents in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates expressed confidence in the United States. That figure dropped by nearly 20 percent in another poll conducted immediately after the collapse of Camp David and the outbreak of the intifada. By spring 2001, the figure dropped again, down to the thirtieth percentile. After the post-September 11 U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan, the number plunged to as low as 3 percent. This dramatic shift was clearly related clearly to U.S. policymaking.

An analysis of such trends reveals the central role that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has played in shaping Arab and Muslim attitudes toward the United States. When citizens of Arab and Muslim countries look at U.S. policy on issues such as democracy or Iraq, they often see it through the painful prism of America's traditional support for Israel. The centrality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Arab public opinion does not mean that Arabs care about

Palestine more than about their own pocketbooks or their own countries. Nevertheless, they do place great importance on supporting Palestinians, just as many American Jews passionately support Israel. From an Arab perspective, the United States has grown closer to Israel since the failure of Camp David and the horror of September 11, while Israel has relied increasingly on the United States to bolster its traditional posture of deterrence in the face of ongoing terrorist attacks. Concurrently, the Palestinians have relied increasingly on Arab and Muslim support to heighten the global impression of Palestinian suffering at the hands of Israeli repression. This dynamic has not necessarily determined the growth of Arab and Muslim resentment toward the United States, but it has certainly exacerbated the problem.

BARRY RUBIN

In order to dissect the sources of anti-Americanism, it is necessary to look at how American values and policies have been portrayed, and often misrepresented, in the Middle East. The case presented by Middle Eastern countries against the United States is very thin. It rests on three basic arguments, all of which reflect the idea that the United States is an immoral, imperialist society that seeks to conquer the Middle East, along with the rest of the world.

The first argument holds that the United States brazenly attacks Arab and Muslim countries. The two main examples cited to prove this claim are Libya and Sudan, despite the fact that U.S. military actions against these countries were not invasions, but individual bombing raids in response to specific terrorist attacks. Moreover, there is no historical evidence from the Middle East to support the portrayal of the United States as a brutal occupying force (whatever the potential validity of such a portrayal in other parts of the world).

The second argument holds that the United States supports tyrannical governments. The evidence used to support this argument is similarly misleading: it consists of two brief interventions in Lebanon, the training of the Saudi Arabian National Guard, and the significant aid provided to the Egyptian government over the past twenty-five years. Any U.S. efforts to push authoritarian governments toward reform are forgotten; indeed, all of the positive things that the United States has done for Arabs and Muslims have gone down what George Orwell termed "the memory hole."

The third argument holds that the United States supports Israel unquestionably. Traditionally, one of two contradictory theories is proffered to account for this blind support: either Israel is portrayed as a puppet of the United States and an agent for projecting U.S. imperialism, or the United States is portrayed as a puppet of Israel. Both of these theories substitute conspiracies for historical evidence. Again, the claimants ignore all of the times that the United States has pressured Israel or aided the Palestinians.

Anti-Americanism did not spring out of the ground spontaneously; it has been carefully nurtured by Arab governments. Over the past fifty years, the Arab world has suffered numerous defeats, failures, and humiliations. Ideological goals were not achieved, and promises were not kept. Despite this history, Arab governments have been remarkably stable. Virtually no regime has changed since 1970-1971. These regimes have survived largely because of systematic, state-sponsored anti-American and anti-Israeli propaganda, used deliberately to persuade Arab populations to rally around their governments in order combat evil foreigners. Regimes provide citizens with a view of the world that portrays the United States as a terrible place -- through the statements of officials; through the state-controlled media; through television, radio, and newspapers; and, in some areas, through control of mosques and schools. In short, anti-Americanism is not an accident; it is systematically programmed into a given population.

The war in Iraq is a very interesting case study for this phenomenon. To counter the complaint from the region that the United States has been supporting dictatorships, the United States has worked to provide a visible alternative of democracy and freedom for the Middle East. Washington sought to convince the region that its aspirations were benevolent by overthrowing Saddam Husayn, bringing democracy to Iraq, and paying for the whole exercise.

Conveying the noble intentions of this endeavor would require opinionmakers in the Arab world to interpret U.S. policy in this light. Unfortunately, the overwhelming majority of Arab newspapers, television and radio stations, schools, mosques, government officials, and opposition figures have portrayed U.S. actions in Iraq as another example of brazen imperialism. In this view, the United States invaded Iraq because it wanted to steal oil and subjugate Muslims and Arabs. Consequently, the criticism that the United States faces regarding Iraq is not based on actual U.S. policy, but rather on Arab interpretations of that policy.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Ben Fishman. ❖

Policy #811

RECOMMENDED



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)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

◆
Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

♦
Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Democracy & Reform (/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)