

Articles & Op-Eds

## Cameo in Cairo

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Iran's fraudulent election and subsequent civil strife demonstrate that, whatever that country's people think about President Obama's desire for mutual respect, the Iranian government is determined to obstruct exactly that goal. Meanwhile, on the Arab side of the Gulf, President Obama's major address to the world's Muslims from Cairo and the surprisingly good showing by moderates in Lebanon's election just a few days later are both now widely viewed as heralding "a new beginning" (to quote the title of the president's speech) in U.S.-Arab relations.

To support this analysis, the pundits invoke statistics from the occasional public-opinion poll taken in the region. For example, according to a phone poll just published by the Egyptian government, nearly 80 percent of Egyptians believe that Obama's speech will improve both bilateral and broader regional ties with the U.S. -- even though only about half as many Egyptians report that they believe all or most of what the U.S. president had to say. Similarly, in a recent Zogby poll, majorities in Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and the U.A.E. agreed that "the Obama administration will bring positive change to U.S.-Arab relations." These findings are all the more striking in comparison to the handful of previous systematic regional surveys, most of which registered a precipitous decline in U.S. approval ratings during the Bush administration, especially after the start of the Iraq War in 2003.

However, the new numbers and the general expectation that they foster raise two important questions. The first is whether these polls are reliable. How much weight should we give to the way people answer a loaded question, especially when many probably assume, probably correctly, that their own government is monitoring the survey? For example, one Iranian phone poll conducted by the polling group Terror Free Tomorrow appears at first glance to support the Iranian government's initial claim of a two-to-one Ahmadinejad win -- until one notices that the poll was taken not on election eve, but before the electoral campaign even began, and that more than half of the sample either were undecided or refused to answer the question. This same organization, with the same pollster, last year produced a phone poll purportedly showing that 95 percent of Syrians think their country's elections are free and fair.

Moreover, different polls from the region sometimes show wildly disparate results. For example, while the Zogby poll cited above shows a 79 percent favorable view of Obama in Saudi Arabia, an IPSOS poll registers only about half (53 percent) holding that view -- a 26-point spread. For Jordan, the spread between these two recent polls was even greater -- and in the opposite direction. According to Zogby, just 31 percent of Jordanians believe Obama will have a positive effect on the region; the IPSOS figure is more than twice as high (64 percent).

The second, even more important question is: Even if one of these polls may be roughly on target, how much should we care? How much difference does it make if Arabs or Iranians say they either do or do not like the U.S., its president, or its foreign policies?

In one sense it matters greatly: Think of the 9/11 attacks. However, groups such as the one that carried out those attacks are on the fringe of their own societies. The U.S. will never win their hearts and minds, and they will never respond meaningfully to any public-opinion poll. Nor would even major changes in the overall poll numbers inspire major changes in terrorist threats. Osama bin Laden will not lay down his weapons just because more Arabs say they have a positive image of America.

But what of the average Arab? Does the anti-American sentiment captured in the polls correlate to any actions taken? Not much at all. In the past six years, since a burst of anti-American street protests at the start of the Iraq War, the incidence of such protests has plummeted to near zero in most Arab states. Egypt, where some of the largest protests occurred in 2003, had only one reported anti-American protest in 2007. The figures for Arabs offered entry visas to the United States have been on the upswing ever since 2003, and in some countries are actually above 2001 levels. The number of Arab students in U.S. universities is very close to the high point set in the 2001-02 school year, even as American universities are setting up satellite campuses around the region.

Business ties show a similar, surprisingly positive pattern. American exports to Arab countries have skyrocketed, from \$16.3 billion in 2000 to \$51.8 billion (in constant dollars) in 2008. The Gulf countries may be the only place with good news for U.S. carmakers: Exports of American vehicles to Saudi Arabia increased more than five times, and to the U.A.E. ten times, between 2003 and 2008. Procter & Gamble proudly points out that its products are used in nine out of ten households in Egypt. Kraft Foods cited heightened demand in the Middle East as a key factor in its worldwide growth in 2006 and 2007. Even when Arabs claim to dislike "Brand America," they like

American brands.

And what about Arab governments? Whatever their publics think, Arab rulers almost never have to worry that pro-American policies could oust them from power in a free election. Most Arab governments have actually upgraded their diplomatic, trade, and security ties with the United States over the last five years, beginning long before Obama won the presidency. Bush signed free-trade agreements with Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain, and Oman. Except for Syria and Sudan, the United States has seen increased military and counterterrorism cooperation across the Arab world -- with traditional allies such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan, and with other countries such as Algeria and Yemen (and of course post-Saddam Iraq). Not to mention the complete turnaround in relations with Libya, from pariah to partner.

In short, regardless of what the Arab polls say, overall relations with the U.S. -- at both official and popular levels -- steadily improved all through the second term of the "hugely unpopular" Bush administration. It appears that common interests matter much more than respectful rhetoric. This is what kept U.S.-Arab relations from deteriorating under our previous president. And it will almost certainly keep those relations firm under our current one, even if President Obama never delivers on all the lofty aspirations he expressed so eloquently in Cairo.

As for Iran, the sad truth is that U.S. efforts at dialogue must pass through an increasingly illegitimate regime. Regardless of who now retroactively "wins" Iran's presidential election, this will remain a regime whose avowed self-interest, according to unelected Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, lies in avoiding precisely the kind of improved ties with Washington that President Obama offers as an incentive for change.

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