



Polling the Arab Public

RELIABLE MEASUREMENTS OF public attitudes in non-democratic societies have always been elusive. This has particularly been the case over the last 60 years in the Arab world where a variety of “fierce” states, dominated by their security apparatuses, severely circumscribed societal and individual freedoms and had a profound chilling effect on public expression.

In recent years, however, many Arab regimes, while remaining entrenched in power, have evolved towards a softer form of authoritarianism, partly in response to the exigencies of globalization, which include a loss on their monopoly on audiovisual media. Two-thirds of the nearly 300 million persons populating Arab League member states are under the age of 30, and many are eager, opinionated participants in the free-wheeling information superhighway. At the same time, public opinion polls are now more scientific than in the past and their results more credible.

One particularly respected, ongoing survey is supervised by Professor Shibley Telhami for the Brookings Institution. The latest one, conducted in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon and the United Arab Emirates, provides considerable food for thought.

One set of answers, focusing on views of the US and President Barack Obama, registered far greater negativity than had been the case in 2009. Obama himself received an overall negative rating of 62% (compared to 23% in 2009), with only 20% viewing him positively (down from 43%). Fully 85% held an overall unfavorable view of the US, a few percentage points higher than in 2008, the last year of the Bush Administration. Just 16% were hopeful regarding US policies (down from 51%), while 63% were discouraged (up from 15%).

Clearly, the good feelings generated by Obama’s Cairo speech and attendant declarations had dissipated, as expectations for a fundamental shift in US foreign policy, particularly regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, had proven to be unwarranted: 61% said that they found US policy towards the conflict the most disappointing of all of its actions.

By contrast, views regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict, including their perceptions of Israeli power, were largely stable. In both 2009 and 2010, 44% stated that Israel was weaker than it looks, while nearly the same number declared that Israel has both strengths and weaknesses and only 12% characterized Israel as “very powerful,” down from 16% in 2008.

Interestingly, although the majority were quite pessimistic regarding the chances for achieving a peace agreement, the percentage of people who were prepared for an Arab-Israeli peace if Israel withdrew to the pre-June 5, 1967 boundaries actually rose from 73% in the two previous years to 86%, with the percentage of those favoring a continuation of the struggle after achieving such a withdrawal being halved from the previous year (12%, down from 25%).

The renewed attraction of the one-state solution for Palestinian intel-



lectuals (and a few Israeli ones as well) found no echo in the survey. Only 10% believed that the collapse of the peace process would bring about the establishment of a unitary state in which Arab and Jews would have equality, while a majority envisaged years of large-scale and lasting violence.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s Holocaust-denial declarations and recent suggestion before the UN General Assembly that the US government was behind the 9/11 bombings are utterly noxious to Israeli and Western publics. But the Brookings survey suggests that at least some of Ahmadinejad’s message does not fall on deaf ears.

To be sure, the survey did not, unfortunately, pose questions about the veracity of

the Holocaust. But it did introduce the topic of the Holocaust as part of a series of questions dealing with empathy. Fully 59% of the respondents stated that watching programs on the Holocaust made them feel resentful, as it would generate sympathy for Jews and Israel at the expense of Palestinians and Arabs; 29% stated that they had mixed feelings; while only 3% stated that their primary response was one of empathy with Jewish victims of Nazism. Clearly, the continuation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict helps deepen pathological views of the Holocaust among a broad swath of the Arab and Muslim worlds.

As for views of Iran, Arab public opinion diverges significantly from those of their governments. While most Arab ruling elites fear the consequences of Iran’s nuclear program and growing power projection, 69% of Egyptians and 57% overall of those polled believe that the outcome for the Middle East of Iran attaining nuclear weapons would be “more positive,” and only 21% “more negative.” Ahmadinejad scores the third highest most admired rating (12%) of leaders outside of one’s own country, behind Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan (19%) and Venezuela’s President Hugo Chavez (13%) and immediately ahead of Hizballah chief Hassan Nasrallah and Syrian President Bashar al-Asad.

With Israel and the US deemed the two countries that pose the biggest threat (86% and 77%, respectively), this most-admired list is hardly surprising. Nor, given the generally poor performance of Arab states in meeting the needs of their populations, is it surprising that the survey records a strengthening of the centrality of their Muslim identity at the expense of their national and Arab ones.

Given the resilience of authoritarian governments and their dominance over their societies, Arab public opinion is considered by policy makers to be of secondary importance. The mythical ‘Arab street’ is just that. Even so, such surveys do provide much insight into the state of the Arab world.

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