

Arab Public Opinion

Testimony of
David Pollock
Visiting Fellow
The Washington Institute for Near East Policy
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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, distinguished colleagues, thank you very much for this opportunity to discuss this important topic with you today. With your permission, I would like to begin with just a word of tribute to the valuable and thoughtful work of other experts in this field, some of which I will cite quite extensively below. And let me also note the outstanding professional support of my previous colleagues, especially Under Secretary of State Paula Dobriansky, and of my current colleagues at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, especially Executive Director Dr. Rob Satloff and my Research Assistant, Ms. Rana Shabb. Of course, responsibility for these remarks is solely mine.

Let us start with the fact that almost all Arab polls show widespread disapproval of American policies, both in Iraq and in the Arab-Israeli arena—and negative overall images of the U.S., especially since we went to war in Iraq. On the brighter side, there is some polling evidence that certain Arab publics increasingly reject terrorism (except against Israelis); continue to voice support for democracy, at least in principle; and feel that a clash of Muslim civilization against the West is not inevitable.

My hope is to find a way forward from this point of departure—but first just a moment on the historical background. Serious political polling in Arab countries is relatively recent, dating back only to the Gulf crisis of 1990/91. From a research perspective, we have come a pretty long way since then. Yet some lessons I learned the hard way back then are still very valid today.

First, we need to take these polls seriously—but also take them with a few grains of salt. They are at best just imperfect snapshots of what people are willing to say to strangers, and we may not be so adept at understanding what exactly it is that they are trying to tell us, or what they may be choosing not to say at all. Second, we need to pay as much attention to the differences among and within Arab publics as to sweeping generalizations about Arab public opinion.

Third, we need to think hard about the “so what” questions: How much does the Arab street matter, compared to the elite? How much do these autocratic governments really care about public opinion? If they do, have they already adjusted their policies to take popular attitudes into account, or is it possible that we know more about what the political traffic will bear than they do? How will people’s attitudes affect their actual behavior, if at all? For example, while it is clear that unfavorable views of American intervention in Iraq are even more widespread today than they were during the 1991 Gulf crisis, we have seen nowhere near the kind of massive protest demonstrations around the major Arab capitals that were witnessed in that earlier episode. These are all complicated and important questions—and analyzing the numbers is just the beginning.

Methodological Note

Even before the beginning, however, a very brief methodological note about Arab public opinion polling is required. Particularly in certain especially problematic cases, we need much fuller information about how these polls were conducted. This should provide full details of sampling frame and methodology, fieldworkers and fieldwork conditions, quality controls, government or other permission or restrictions, sponsorship, full demographics of sample, full questionnaire and “topline” or “marginal” results, refusal rate, and any other pertinent information. If, for instance, a poll is not a true probability sample, but some kind of quota or hybrid one, then we need to know that—it means that the so-called “margin of error” has no statistical validity.

Without getting too technical, let me mention just a couple of other tough methodological issues. One concerns the unusual demographics of some Arab countries. For example, the United Arab Emirates has a total population of about 4-5 million, but expatriate workers living in that country outnumber UAE nationals by the extraordinary ratio of about five-to-one—and by an even higher margin in the work force, which is where most reported survey samples are taken. So, a poll reported from the UAE may not really be a UAE poll at all, but a kind of indeterminate mixture of Arab opinions from many other countries, unless the local sub-sample is somehow explicitly identified. Saudi Arabia poses a similar problem, in that the labor force is probably more than half non-Saudis. Moreover, social controls are so severe in Saudi Arabia that one has to wonder about the authenticity of the responses recorded.

Another issue is timing. For example, some recent polls were conducted during Ramadan, when Arabs themselves will tell you they are often cranky after fasting every day, and also more influenced by Islamic ideas. It is even conceivable that this accident of timing may be partly responsible for the apparent further dip in perceptions of the U.S. from 2005 to 2006. For these reasons, one should be especially cautious about any data from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, or other Arab Gulf states, and pay very close attention to the timing.

In my own remarks below, I will therefore focus on other key Arab countries from which we have better data from several different polls over a longer period: Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt. I will then turn to a couple of major regional issues: Israel and Iran. Before proceeding, however, two general sets of observations are in order regarding some broad findings from across the region: First, how much Arab opinions may differ from ours; and second, how much Arabs may differ with each other, whether from one country to another, among different groups within each country, or over time.

Different World Views

We should understand that there may well be major differences between American and Arab views, not just about matters of opinion, but also about what most Americans would consider matters of fact. For example, the December 2006/January 2007 University of Maryland poll asked about the 9/11 attacks. In both Egypt and Morocco, only about half said they were even “somewhat confident” they knew who was behind them. And about as many in each country, roughly a third, blamed the U.S. government or Israel as identified Al-Qa’idah. Similarly, the April 2006 Pew poll found a solid majority (59 percent) in Egypt saying they did not believe that “groups of Arabs” carried out the 9/11 attacks. In Jordan, the corresponding figure was almost as high, at 53 percent.

This counter-intuitive finding is almost certainly related to another, broader one. In Egypt, fully 57 percent say that “nearly all” of “what happens in the world today ... is controlled by the U.S.”; an additional 32 percent say the U.S. controls “most” of what goes on. And a majority of Moroccans agree, albeit by a smaller margin (63 percent). This is the essential background against which conspiracy theories and other pejorative views of American policy thrive.

In the April 2006 poll, to cite but one instance of such theories, a little over half of Egyptians and Jordanians said that relations between Muslim and Westerners were generally bad. When those respondents were then asked which side was to blame for this state of affairs, a majority in each country singled out the Westerners, and a handful said both sides—while around a quarter of Egyptians and Jordanians volunteered the response that it was actually the Jews who are to blame.

We must also be careful about loose talk regarding “shared values.” Some of the best current examples come from Egypt—by far the largest Arab country, and one from which several recent polls are available, probably for the first time ever. At first glance, there is plenty of encouraging popular support for democracy in Egypt. Pew found 65 percent saying “democracy is not just for the West, and can work well here.” Similarly, the January 2007 Maryland poll finds 52 percent saying democracy is a “very good way” of governing Egypt, plus 30 percent saying it is a “fairly good way.”

But how does this square with other responses in the same poll? Three-quarters of Egyptians also want (50 percent strongly and 24 percent somewhat) “to require a strict application of Shari’ah law in every Islamic country.” And a remarkable 80 percent “strongly” want “to keep Western values out of Islamic countries.” No wonder nearly half (45 percent) of Egyptians think a “violent conflict between Muslim and Western cultures” is “inevitable,” with the other half (49 percent) saying it is “possible to find common ground.”

In much the same vein, while Zogby shows a majority (59 percent) of Egyptians saying it is U.S. policies rather than values that antagonize them, other responses in the same poll tell a different story. Half of Egyptians indeed say that U.S. policies in Palestine, Lebanon, and Iraq have negative effects on their opinion of the U.S., as against just 20-25

reporting positive effects. But almost the same proportions report negative (41-42 percent) rather than positive (21-22 percent) effects from the values of “American freedom and democracy,” or from “American promotion of democracy” in other countries.

Another elusive “values” issue is the role of religion. Arabs, in sharp contrast to Europeans, tend to say that Americans are not religious enough. Yet there is absolutely no evidence that a heavier dose of religion, or even an emphasis on our common faith in God, would improve our message reception among Arab audiences. On the contrary; there is some research suggesting that precisely the opposite would be the case, probably because some Arabs would view that type of outreach as disingenuous or condescending, or simply as coming from bearers of the “wrong” religion.

One other comment about “shared values” concerns the role of the United Nations. Some have argued that a more multilateral U.S. foreign policy, grounded firmly in UN resolutions and international law, would be more appealing to Arab (and other) publics. But the polling data suggest that caution is in order. Egypt’s public, for one, is split down the middle on the UN: 49 percent favorable v. 51 percent unfavorable, according to the mid-2006 Pew poll. The same poll shows Jordanians heavily tilted against the UN (30 percent v. 69 percent), only a marginal improvement over their very negative view in mid-2004.

Further, there is no evidence that all of the recent UN Security Council Resolutions on Iraq, Syria, or Lebanon have had the slightest effect on Arab public opinion. Iran, however, may be a mildly different case. This is because, as a non-Arab target, there could be some popular predisposition to credit or at least to cite UN action against it, as Arab discourse often does in relation to Israel.

Finally, and maybe most important of all, we must beware of our own ethnocentrism, even as we try to better understand others. We should not assume that attitudes toward the U.S. are all that important, for better or worse, in the overall opinion climate in any given foreign country. This holds true both generally, and in relation to the particular issues of greatest interest to us. In a very thorough study Jordanian and Algerian attitudes, for instance, Prof. Mark Tessler demonstrates that views of their own government are at least as relevant as views of U.S. policy in explaining expressions of support for terrorism, in both of those significant and quite different Arab societies.

Differences among and within Arab Publics over Time

The preceding points lead directly to my second set of general observations, which relate to this crucial theme: The differences of opinion among and within different Arab publics are often more important than sweeping generalizations about the “Arab street.” And the ways Arab opinions change in response to specific events, and over time, are often more important than sweeping generalizations about a “growing gap” between Arab governments and their own people, or about a “deepening divide” between Arabs and Americans.

For example, asked by Zogby to rank five political issues in terms of their impact on each country's stability or economy in 2006, Lebanese not surprisingly ranked the Israel-Lebanon conflict number one in both categories. But that issue was down in fourth place in faraway Morocco. Even more glaring is this disjunction: in mid-2005, the Pew poll showed 73 percent of Moroccans saw Islamic extremism as a threat to their country—while just 10 percent of Jordanians agreed. Yet the December 2006/January 2007 Maryland poll shows an astonishingly low 1 percent of Moroccans saying terrorism is a “very big problem” in their country—compared with an astonishingly high 62 percent of Egyptians. Here the difference is probably the passage of more than a year's time since the previous major incident in Morocco, as against fresh memories in Egypt of terrorism in Sinai.

Similarly, the low level of Jordanian concern was recorded before the November 2005 suicide bombing of a local wedding party at Amman's Radisson Hotel. By April 2006, according to the Pew poll, 69 percent of Jordanians were saying they were at least “somewhat” concerned by “the rise of Islamic extremism” in their country—while the percentage saying suicide bombing was never justified had shot up to 43 percent from just 11 percent the year before. The University of Maryland poll conducted by Dr. Steven Kull later in the year confirms this reading.

Even within certain individual Arab countries, it can be misleading to analyze public opinion at the national level. In Lebanon, for instance, the cleavages among the Christian, Sunni, and Shi'i segments of society are so pronounced that it makes little sense to speak of Lebanese public opinion as a whole. To cite just two relevant cases in point: In June 2005, Pew found that a mere 22 percent of Lebanese Muslims had a favorable view of the U.S.—compared with around 90 percent of Lebanese Christians. After the war with Israel the next year, Zogby found that U.S. policy toward Lebanon was viewed overwhelmingly poorly (90 percent v. 7 percent) by Lebanon's Shi'is, and predominantly poorly (52 percent v. 31 percent) by the Sunnis there—but narrowly positively by the country's Christian community (45 percent v. 40 percent). This is such a special case that it requires separate consideration, beyond the scope of this summary presentation. To some extent, such deep demographic divisions are also at work in Iraq today. In that case, however, there are a few recent signs pointing toward a partial convergence of views on some issues, as will be discussed separately.

So, the analysis of Arab public opinion should be conducted mainly on a country- by- country basis, and where appropriate even by different groups within each country. This approach has the added virtue of facilitating a close comparison of several different polls, to look at important questions of how closely the results match or how much and why they may differ (what is known in the professional jargon as “inter-pollster reliability”). And the analysis should focus more on careful analysis of trends over time, rather than single snapshots, while exercising especial vigilance to identify any time-bound results or “one-shot wonders.” Having thus set the stage, we can now turn to the analysis of public opinion in four key individual Arab countries: Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, and Egypt.

Iraqi Public Opinion

Let me begin with three quick general points about public opinion in Iraq: First, from personal observation, it is abundantly clear to me that the security situation in Iraq makes public opinion polling there very difficult. On the other hand, more Iraqis now feel fairly free to speak their minds than was the case under Saddam, which does help quite a lot. So overall I think there are some valid Iraqi opinion polls with certain interesting results to look at, although these numbers do need to be taken with a few extra proverbial grains of salt.

A second major point: there are sharp differences of view among Iraqis' three major communities: Shii Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds. At least through September of 2006, Kurds had by far the most positive attitudes, and Sunni Arabs the most negative ones, while Shii Arabs were somewhere in between. In March 2007, one poll reported widely divergent preferences among these three groups for Iraq's political future. A majority of Kurds (66 percent) desired democracy, while a majority of Sunnis preferred a "strongman" with unlimited tenure in power; Shi'is were divided right down the middle (41 percent v. 40 percent) between democracy and an Islamic state.

Third, Iraqi public opinion, like most others, can change very considerably over just a few months' time. Two of the best published polls I have seen, for example, show significant changes in attitudes between January and September 2006—including more criticism of U.S. forces, and less optimism about Iraq's situation, along with a surprising increase in support for Iraq's own security forces (except among Sunnis). But I would not be surprised today to find that some of these attitudes have again shifted considerably over the past seven or eight months.

Nevertheless, since the September 2006 data (from the University of Maryland Program on International Policy Attitudes) are the most recent reliable and detailed ones available, a few striking findings are worth noting. Wherever possible, I will compare these data with whatever data have been reported from three more recent polls: one cosponsored by USA Today, which was conducted February 25-March 7 of this year; another conducted by the British firm Opinion Research Business in February 2007; and a third conducted by Gallup International, also earlier this year.

For starters, according to the September 2006 Maryland poll, only about one-third of Iraqis wanted U.S. forces to withdraw within six months—but about two-thirds wanted that to happen within a year. At the same time, if the U.S. were to commit to any kind of timeline for withdrawal, or at least to renounce any desire for permanent military bases in Iraq, then opposition to U.S. forces would diminish—and the majority support for U.S. military training and economic development programs would increase further.

The very extensive British poll in late February/early March 2007 lends some additional credence to this overall attitudinal portrait. That poll showed, surprisingly, a majority of Shi'is think security would get better (62 percent) rather than worse (14 percent) "in the immediate weeks following a withdrawal of Multinational Forces." Sunnis were split on

this question (42 percent v. 43 percent). Once again, the Kurds stood out, with a clear majority (64 percent) apprehensive that security would worsen at least “a little” in the wake of such a withdrawal.

In the meantime, of the three major Iraqi communities, only the Kurds predominantly (55 percent) gave U.S. troops favorable reviews. Sunnis (97 percent) and Shi’is (91 percent) alike overwhelmingly voiced little or no confidence in those forces. Numbers reported from the early 2007 USA Today poll indicate very little change in this picture, although an exact comparison cannot be made due to probable differences in question wording and other details. Only about one-third of Iraqis in that survey saw their own government as really in charge of the country; nearly 60 percent attributed that to the U.S. instead.

Yet despite all the hardships, 75-80 percent of both Shiis and Kurds—but only one in ten Sunni Arabs—continued to say that getting rid of Saddam was worthwhile. More surprisingly, according to the USA Today poll, in response to a slightly different question, a slim plurality overall still said life was better rather than worse (43 percent v. 36 percent) today, as compared with Saddam’s time. The early 2007 British poll shows a slightly more positive valence: 49 percent better, compared with just 26 percent worse. But the demographic breakdown is equally telling: Shi’is are heavily positive (66 percent v. 6 percent); Kurds even more so (75 percent v. 4 percent); while Sunnis predominantly feel that things were actually better under Saddam (51 percent), rather than under “the present political system (29 percent). The early 2007 Gallup poll shows, by comparison, shows generally less positive percentages in response to similar questions.

A more universal bright spot is that roughly three-quarters even of Sunni Arabs, and nearly all Shi’is and Kurds, voiced a negative opinion of both Al-Qa’idah and Osama Bin Laden in the Maryland survey. Only about one-in-five (18 percent), however, place primary blame for Iraq’s violence on Al-Qa’idah or other foreign forces, according to the USA Today poll.

Equally striking, as of last September, a majority (63 percent) overall said Prime Minister Maliki’s government was doing at least a “somewhat good” job—though only one in five Sunni Arabs agreed with that assessment. Mr. Maliki had a personal approval rating of 86 percent among Shi’is, and 58 percent among Kurds, but merely 14 percent among Sunni Arabs, giving him an overall approval figure of about 65 percent. By March of this year, though, as measured in the USA Today poll, these numbers had declined a great deal. About half (53 percent) now said the government was doing a bad job; and Mr. Maliki’s rating had slipped about 20 points, to just 43 percent.

The pattern for two other leading Shi’i figures was completely different, going back to the September 2006 Maryland poll. Among the Shi’is, Ayatollah Sistani got a 95 percent approval rating, and Muqtada Al-Sadr was not far behind with 81 percent (though only half viewed him “very” favorably). By contrast, Sunni Arabs and Kurds gave both men roughly 80-90 percent negative ratings.

Asked in September 2006 whether Iraq would stay a single country over the next five years, majorities of all three major groups said yes, but by very different margins: Shi'is, 80 percent; Kurds, 65 percent, and Sunnis, 56 percent. By March 2007, there appear to be some shifts in this constellation: somewhat more Kurds (41 percent) predicting independence, but more Sunnis (75 percent) anticipating Iraqi unity, perhaps because of greater government efforts to include and protect that community as internal conflict continues. A plurality of Shi'is (48 percent) now foresee a federation of regional governments, which appears to be in line with the position of the largest Shi'i political party (SCIRI).

Iraq's key neighbors garner skeptical attitudes that even cross sectarian lines, at least to some extent. Only a minority (45 percent) of Iraqi Shi'is said that predominantly Shi'i Iran was exerting a positive influence in their own country; and only a minority (41 percent) or Iraqi Sunnis said the same of Syria, despite its widely reported backing for Sunni insurgents. Iran's influence is viewed negatively by most Iraqi Kurds (71 percent, up from 63 percent in January 2006) and Sunnis (94 percent) alike. Syria's influence likewise elicits largely negative reactions from Iraqi Shi'is (68 percent) as well as Kurds (63 percent).

By early 2007, judging from preliminary reports of the USA Today poll, views of Iran had hardened a bit, with a solid majority (71 percent) overall saying Tehran is actively encouraging sectarian violence in Iraq. Two-thirds, about the same as before, say that about Syria. And a narrower majority (56 percent) accuse Saudi Arabia as well of supporting Iraqi sectarian conflict—the first time this important question has been reported.

Altogether, then, from the standpoint of internal public opinion, the picture in Iraq as of early this year appears mixed, trending down and certainly divided, but not hopelessly so. Whether or not this picture will change yet again, and what difference if any that might make for U.S. prospects in Iraq, are good questions for additional inquiry in the coming period. It does appear, to cite one possible conclusion, that emphatic U.S. agreement to forswear a permanent military presence in Iraq, and possibly also to negotiate even a very long-term target date for withdrawal, could have some beneficial effects on the public opinion climate in that country.

Just a word is in order here about the latest data on how other Arab publics see the situation in Iraq. Unlike most Iraqis, they do not think the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was worthwhile; and they roundly reject U.S. policy on this issue. But looking ahead, large minorities in some Arab publics, according to Prof. Shibley Telhami's analysis of the November 2006 Zogby poll, are now inclined to see dire consequences from a rapid American withdrawal. In neighboring Jordan and Saudi Arabia, just over a third predicted that in this case the Iraqi "civil war will expand rapidly." Fragmentary reports about more recent Zogby polling on this subject suggest a similar conclusion, possibly with more emphasis on a perceived Iranian threat.

Jordanian Public Opinion

Jordan is one of the few Arab states for which we have fairly detailed and credible long-term trend data on popular attitudes, although it would be highly misleading to generalize from those data to the region as a whole. In the early 1990's, when serious polling started in Jordan, it was usually both desirable and feasible to obtain separate results for the Palestinian-origin majority and the East Bank minority of the country's population—who often had substantially different views on various topical issues, including the possibility of peace with Israel. More recent data are rarely reported with this demographic breakdown, however, perhaps because intermarriage and other socialization factors have blurred some of these differences over time. The discussion that follows will focus on the latest five-year trends—always more informative than any single snapshot—in overall Jordanian public opinion,

Regarding attitudes toward the U.S., there was some evidence of a modest rebound in Jordan since the nadir reached right after the American capture of Baghdad. In mid-2005, favorable views of the U.S. were almost back at their prewar level in the low 20 percent (Pew polls) or low 30 percent (Zogby polls) range, after having plummeted to single digits in 2003 and 2004. The June 2006 Pew polls, however, showed a slide back to just 15 percent favorable; and the November 2006 Zogby poll (limited to metropolitan Amman and Zarqa) registered just 5 percent in that positive category. Surprisingly, only one-in-five Jordanians said the Lebanon war that summer had worsened their view of the U.S.; most blamed U.S. policy in Iraq or Palestine.

In both of these polls, positive Jordanian views of Americans as people have held steady over the past two years in the 30 percent range, up from barely 20 percent in 2003 and 2004 (though down sharply from 53 percent in 2002). Jordan is thus a counterexample to a purported new global trend toward more negative views on this question.

One very dramatic five-year trend in Jordan is the total reversal, in a positive direction, in popular perceptions of “the way things are going in our country.” In 2002, Jordanians started from a low point of 78 percent dissatisfied, as against a mere 21 percent satisfied. After that, year by year, there was a steady upward climb to 69 percent satisfied and just 30 percent dissatisfied by 2005, before leveling off at 53 percent v. 44 percent in mid-2006. This major improvement occurred despite the constant turmoil surrounding Jordan on all sides during this period—strongly suggesting that foreign policy, whether in Iraq or Palestine, does not figure as prominently in public attitudes as is sometimes supposed.

Moroccan Public Opinion

Morocco has a large and unusually open society, with around 30 million people of mixed Arab and Berber heritage and a very well developed commercial survey research capability. Yet inter-pollster reliability seems noticeably low here. For example, on the key question of favorable overall views of the U.S., Pew reports a drastic decline from 77 percent in 1999/2000, to just 27 percent in 2003 and 2004, in the wake of the American intervention in Iraq. This was followed by a large rebound to 49 percent in 2005,

according to Pew. But Zogby reports just 34 percent favorable that same year—followed by a huge and unexplained drop to a mere 7 percent in 2006.

The December 2006 Maryland poll, in contrast, breaks this down into favorable views of “the current U.S. government,” twice as high at 16 percent—alongside widely (64 percent) favorable views of both “the American people” and “American culture.” Once again, Zogby records a much less favorable result in responses to a subtly different question, showing that just 28 percent of Moroccans say their view of the American people has a positive “impact on their overall opinion of the U.S.”

Equally intriguing are some of the apparent contradictions (or ambivalence) in Moroccan attitudes even as reported in the very same poll. For instance, the same Pew poll from 2005 that shows just 49 percent favorable to the U.S. also shows a much larger figure—65 percent—saying that the world would be more dangerous, not safer, if another country were as powerful as the U.S. And yet, in the same poll again, a majority (56 percent) of Moroccans also said that suicide attacks against Americans in Iraq were justifiable.

There is, however, one clear positive five-year trend in Moroccan public opinion worth noting: a steep increase in opposition to most other forms of jihadi terrorism, almost certainly related to Morocco’s own tragic experience with that phenomenon in the past few years. From 2003 to 2005, the percentage of Moroccans who voiced even “some confidence” in Osama Bin Laden was cut almost in half, from 49 percent to 26 percent. The December 2006 Maryland poll tends to confirm this figure (though an additional 26 percent voiced “mixed” feelings about Bin Laden). And in just one year, from 2004 to 2005, the percentage saying that violence against civilians is at least “sometimes” justified was slashed by a factor of 3, from 40 percent to a mere 13 percent.

Even so, some caveats are in order. An additional 20 percent or so of Moroccans continue to feel that violence against civilians is “rarely” (or, in the December 2006 Maryland poll, “weakly”) justified. And when the word “civilian” is dropped from the question, support for attacks goes up considerably. When “a Muslim blows himself up while attacking an enemy,” 35 percent of Moroccans say this is “often” or “sometimes” justified. About the same percentage approve of at least “some” groups in the Muslim world that attack Americans.” And both the Pew poll in mid-2005 and the Maryland poll in late 2006 found solid majorities supporting “attacks on U.S. military troops in Iraq”—though of course this is mainly a hypothetical question in distant Morocco, at the opposite end of the Arab world.

Egyptian Public Opinion

As in Morocco, there are some serious inter-pollster reliability uncertainties in Egypt. For example, the Pew poll conducted in April 2006 shows 69 percent v. 30 percent of Egyptians with an unfavorable rather than a favorable opinion of the U.S. The Zogby poll conducted in November 2006, by contrast, shows a worse result by about 15 points in both directions: 83 percent unfavorable, and just 14 percent favorable.

One might guess that this reflects the difference in timing, since this Zogby poll was taken not long after the unpopular Israel-Lebanon war. But the previous Zogby poll, taken in late 2005, recorded almost exactly the same highly unfavorable view of the U.S. The difference from Pew may actually be due to the nature of the samples: Pew is truly a national poll, while Zogby is confined to metropolitan Cairo and Alexandria (approximately one-quarter of Egypt's total population). Question wording also matters a great deal: Zogby notes that just 23 percent of Egyptians said their view of the American people has a positive impact on their overall opinion of the U.S.; while the Maryland poll from January 2007 shows nearly twice as many (40 percent) favorable views of the American people per se. (Pew's corresponding figure from April 2006 is similar, at 36 percent.)

Regarding "the current U.S. government," though, there is no good news to report from Egyptian public opinion. The Maryland poll shows a whopping 93 percent unfavorable. This is even worse than the 83-85 percent measured by Zogby in 2005 and 2006, and among the very worst ever recorded from any Arab public. Recall that the corresponding figure for Morocco, as of early 2007, is "only" 76 percent unfavorable toward the U.S. government—and just half feel "very" unfavorable, compared with fully 86 percent of Egyptians.

The contrast with Morocco is also instructive when it comes to attacks on U.S. targets. In Egypt, 83 percent say they "strongly" approve of "attacks on U.S. military troops in Iraq"; in Morocco, that number is just 39 percent. Two-thirds of Egyptians approve of at least some "groups in the Muslim world that attack Americans"; just 38 percent of Moroccans say the same. In Egypt, 40 percent voice at least a "somewhat positive" view of Osama Bin Laden; in Morocco, as noted above, that figure is just 27 percent. (It must be noted, however, that fully a quarter of Moroccans but just 6 percent of Egyptians say they "don't know" or refuse to answer this question.) And one-quarter of Egyptians, as against mere 9 percent of Moroccans, say they "support Al-Qa'idah's attacks on Americans, and share its attitudes toward the U.S."

What accounts for these awful Egyptian perceptions? Dissatisfaction with U.S. policies is clearly a big part of the explanation. Yet curiously, only half of Egyptians themselves told the Zogby pollsters that U.S. policy in Palestine, Lebanon, or Iraq had a negative effect on their overall opinion of the U.S. (rather than the U.S. government). Also, as noted above, only a narrow majority of Egyptians (59 percent), substantially fewer than in most other Zogby sample countries, say it is U.S. policies that underpin their attitudes. (That percentage in Morocco, to continue with this comparison, was the highest, at 88 percent.) And it is a fact that Egyptian opinion about the U.S. was highly negative even before the latest Iraq war or Lebanon war: 76 percent in the 2002 Zogby poll.

So, in addition to Egyptian popular rejection of U.S. policies on any or all of those issues, one searches for some additional explanatory factors. One possibility is the virulently anti-American media coverage in Egypt, whether official, semi-official, or opposition. Another, more speculative idea is that the very closeness of the U.S.-Egyptian official

embrace, and the billions of dollars in annual aid that have gone with it for the past quarter-century, have actually made Egyptians especially suspicious of American motives. There is just a bit of evidence for this hypothesis buried in the January 2007 Maryland survey. Egyptians and Moroccans were asked their view of this statement: “American pretends to be helpful to Muslim countries, but in fact everything it does is really part of a scheme to take advantage of people in the Middle East and steal their oil.” Sad to say, three-quarters of Egyptians agreed *strongly*—precisely twice the percentage of Moroccans with that attitude.

One other possibility is that Egyptians are just plain generally more disgruntled lately, and that some of this spills over to their views of the U.S. The bit of evidence for this hypothesis comes from the November 2006 Zogby poll. As compared with the previous year, Egyptian attitudes apparently underwent a complete reversal, from positive to negative, on the twin questions of feeling “better or worse off” today than four years earlier, and of expectations four years hence. In contrast, Moroccan attitudes on these questions, while showing a slight downturn, stayed predominantly positive. It may be that the Egyptian public’s relatively pessimistic overall disposition lately is contributing to their extraordinarily unfavorable view of the U.S. None of this is meant to imply that the major reasons behind Egyptian popular animosity toward the U.S. are either irrelevant or irrational—only that the seemingly extraneous factors mentioned above may be exacerbating the underlying problem.

In the end, are there any positive elements in Egyptian attitudes on issues of particular American concern? Perhaps the most heartening news is that Egyptians soundly (90 percent) reject attacks on American civilians, whether in the U.S. or in “Islamic countries.” Another rare bright spot is that not only does a large majority (82 percent) of Egyptians endorse democracy as at least a “fairly good” way of governing their country, but a majority (57 percent) also endorses, albeit by a much narrower margin, “the laws permitting freedom of expression in the U.S.” But otherwise it is all too apparent that the perceptual gap between Egyptians and Americans is dishearteningly broad and deep.

Major Regional Issue: Israel

There remain two issues—Iran and Israel—so timely and important as to justify an exception to the admonition about looking mainly at opinions in individual Arab countries, instead of at a broad regional canvas.

Israel and Palestine are important to all Arab publics surveyed, but the extent of this importance varies considerably—both from one country to another, and also over time. The Zogby polls of six Arab states from November 2005, for example, showed a truly startling drop across the board in the salience of this issue for views of the U.S., as compared with other, more urgent concerns at the time: Iraq and “U.S. treatment of Arabs and Muslims.”

A year later, after the latest Lebanon war, Arab-Israeli issues were way back up on the Arab popular agenda. Still, there were major differences of degree. In the same six Arab

countries—Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—respondents were asked this (loaded) question: “How important is the Palestine issue in your priorities?” Majorities everywhere said it ranked in the top three; but only in Jordan did a majority (73 percent) rank it their first priority. Elsewhere, about half (48 percent) of Egyptians, and only a quarter of Saudis, gave this issue top priority.

What about the Palestinians themselves? U.S. government officials, along with American university and NGO colleagues, can take pride in having helped train and support the first scientific Palestinian pollsters, starting right after the first Oslo Accords in 1993-94. Today these Palestinian polls, many of which remain reliable at least in broad outline, show an important pattern. Despite the Hamas electoral victory in January 2006, a majority of the Palestinian public continues to believe in a two-state solution, one that implies peaceful coexistence with Israel.

A few brave souls have even started serious polling about some of the key sticking points on the path to such a solution—such as the fate of Palestinian refugees. The question is whether they would accept the right to return to a new Palestinian state, rather than to what is now Israel, or else agree to permanent resettlement and compensation elsewhere. The results so far are inconclusive, but perhaps that in itself gives some grounds for hope.

In a similar vein, among other Arab societies, one of the most interesting new findings comes from Shibley Telhami’s analysis of the November 2006 Zogby polling data. Surprisingly, even in the wake of the Lebanon war, opinion in all six countries sampled predominantly showed at least a skeptical inclination toward “a lasting and comprehensive peace with Israel” in exchange for “return of all the territories occupied in the 1967 war, including East Jerusalem.” Minorities, ranging from 42 percent in Saudi Arabia to just 16 percent in the UAE next door, opted for this response: “Even if the Israelis return all the territories occupied in 1967 peacefully, the Arab should continue to fight, no matter what the outcome.”

In other words, as Prof. Telhami has described it, when the Saudis relaunched their Arab Initiative of 2002 this year, they were “pushing on an open door,” at least in terms of the general public opinion climate in certain key Arab states. Moreover, about twice as many overall (62 percent) picked the two-state Palestine solution, rather than American withdrawal from Iraq (33 percent) or other options, as their first or second choice to “improve your view of the U.S. most.” As usual, the devil is in the details. But it may be helpful to keep these surprising findings in mind as one considers how far Arab governments can “get ahead” of their publics in possible peace negotiations. Today, unfortunately, just 23 percent of Moroccans, and a mere 7 percent of Egyptians, are convinced that “the creation of an independent and economically viable Palestinian state” is in fact a credible objective of U.S. policy.

Also interesting is the extent of apparent popular support for Hamas, or for a Palestinian unity government including Hamas, in another major Arab country: Saudi Arabia. The November 2006 Zogby poll showed a third of Saudis supporting Hamas—more than twice the percentage in Jordan (14 percent), a majority of whose population are actually

of Palestinian origin. Another third of Saudis backed a Palestinian unity government; while barely a fifth picked Fatah and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. This reading of the opinion climate may have something to do with the fact that, a few months later, Saudi King Abdullah secured the Mecca Accord on the Hamas-Fatah Palestinian unity government in power today—a crucial initiative that seems to have caught our policymakers off-guard.

Finally, a brief comment is in place about Arab attitudes toward the legendary “Israeli lobby.” Notwithstanding all the publicity it has received lately, only in Saudi Arabia of these six Arab publics does even a slim plurality (40 percent) see “U.S. domestic politics” as President Bush’s “primary motivation” in Mideast policy, as opposed to “U.S. national interests.” The 2005 Zogby poll came up with a result pointing in the same general direction. Similarly, only in Saudi Arabia does a plurality (44 percent) attribute American policy in the region primarily to “Israeli influence.” All the other five publics surveyed seem to have an even more “realist” view of U.S. Mideast policy, which may also be a helpful guide to formulating that policy in the future.

Major Regional Issue: Iran

Arab opinion of Iran, and with that the whole matter of a possible Sunni v. Shi’i split, have suddenly emerged again over the past year as among the most talked-about issues on the Mideast policy horizon. There is not yet much hard data to go by, however. The one thing that can be said about it with certainty is that more research is needed.

The mid-2006 Pew poll includes just Egypt and Jordan, and shows Egyptian overall views of Iran to be moderately positive (59 percent favorable v. 39 percent unfavorable), while Jordanians were evenly divided (49 percent v. 51 percent). In a like fashion, only a third of Egyptians (34 percent) and somewhat more Jordanians (44 percent) considered “the current government in Iran” to pose even a moderate danger to “stability in the Middle East.” But these negative Jordanian voices were up sharply from just 16 percent recorded three years earlier, in May 2003.

Moreover, these Arab publics’ views of Iran’s controversial leader were even more negative. Two-thirds expressed “not much confidence” or none at all in Iranian President Ahmadinejad, both in Egypt and in Jordan. Even just after the 2006 Lebanon war, he was named as “most admired world leader by no more than 5 percent in any of the six Arab countries sampled by Zogby.

Nevertheless, at least as of late last year, Arab publics appeared remarkably blasé about Iran’s nuclear program. In the six-country Zogby poll in November 2006, respondents in each country predominantly said Iran “has the right to its nuclear program,” despite “international pressure.” This was the case even though majorities in Egypt and Lebanon, and at least a third in the other countries, believed Iran was in fact trying to develop nuclear weapons. Moreover, at most 20 percent of the public in any of these Arab states said that one of their top two concerns about the war in Iraq (out of five options offered) was that “Iran is now a more powerful state.”

The Pew poll from April 2006 offers some insight into these unexpectedly nonchalant views. If Iran did acquire nuclear weapons, majorities in Egypt (57 percent) and Jordan (67 percent) believed, it would probably “use them for defensive purposes only”—or else to “attack Israel” (Egypt, 61 percent; Jordan, 65 percent). Only about half thought Iran would likely attack either the U.S. or Europe. And closer to home, just 15-20 percent in either place thought Iran would give nuclear arms to terrorists, or “attack another Muslim country.”

This laissez-faire attitude may be changing, however. A more recent poll reported by Zogby claims that 78 percent of Saudis, and “more than two-thirds of Jordanians, Emiratis, Lebanese and Egyptians” now give negative ratings to non-Arab Iran’s role in Arab Iraq. But further details about this finding have not yet been made publicly available.

Part of the Iran nexus is its support for Lebanon’s Shi’i Hezbollah movement and its leader, Sheikh Hasan Nasrallah. While he appeared as a hero on Arab TV screens and websites during the Summer 2006 war with Israel, the Zogby poll taken just a few months later shows that Nasrallah’s popularity outside Lebanon was spotty, seeming to vary inversely with distance. He was picked as “most admired world leader” by just 13 percent in Egypt, 10 percent in Jordan, and 8 percent in Saudi Arabia—but by 22 percent in Morocco, and an amazing 31 percent in the UAE (perhaps in part because of its significant expatriate Shi’i population).

Strangely, in another Zogby poll back in May 2004, Nasrallah actually had more such votes (18 percent) in Saudi Arabia, and about as many (9 percent) in Jordan and Egypt—suggesting that perhaps his star did not really shine so brightly among Sunni audiences as a result of the 2006 war (or perhaps that there are problems with these poll data). In any case, in the nine months since the end of that war, anecdotal information suggests that Nasrallah has lost much of his luster among Arab publics outside Lebanon.

Conclusions: How To Do a Better Job with Arab Public Opinion

Overall, the challenge is clear: The U.S. image has declined considerably in several key Arab countries over the past few years. In the long run, especially if this trend continues and impinges more on Arab government policies, this could constrain our policy options in the region. At the same time, there may be some new opportunities on several major policy issues: growing popular opposition to most forms of terrorism against civilians, increasing concern about Iran, and support for a peaceful, two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conundrum. Let me close with just three modest, practical suggestions for how we might be able to do a better job of dealing with this challenge and these opportunities.

First, we can do a better job of understanding Arab public opinion, without either sensationalism or undue apology. It would help to focus more on country-by-country rather than sweeping regional analyses. It would also help to share and compare more

information from different pollsters, including all the polls sponsored by various U.S. government offices at State, USAID, the Department of Defense, and others. And it would help to make sure that our best experts, especially those with critical language skills, stay on the job—rather than being excluded on spurious “security” grounds that really reflect improper or illegal discrimination, or even attempts to cover up grave malfeasance by our own security officials.

Second, once we are armed with better understanding, we can do a better job of communicating with Arab publics. We can do this, in my judgment, by focusing more on frank discussion of the issues that divide us, not by vague appeals to supposedly shared values. One good reason to shift in this direction is that Arabs themselves generally tell the pollsters that their problem is our policies, not our values. Another good reason is that Arabs themselves tell the pollsters that what they do admire about Americans is not just our educational achievements or our technology, but also our freedom of expression. If that is indeed the case, we should stop being shy about freely expressing our views to them, even on the hardest policy problems. My own personal experience in the region over many years leads me to believe that most Arabs actually respect such open exchanges, much more than beating around the bush. One of the highest compliments one hears on the Arab street, or among the Arab elite for that matter, is that someone is speaking “bisarahah” or “dughri”—sincerely and straight.

Third, though this may be a bit beyond the scope of this hearing, we should keep in mind that Arab public opinion is just part of the picture. Even in the Middle East, other publics are paying some attention to our policies, and could affect them: Israelis and Iranians, for example, or Turks and Kurds. And beyond the Middle East, Arabs account for just a quarter or so of the world’s Muslims; there are about a billion others. Their views may matter profoundly to us as well, even if some of their own governments sometimes seem to neglect them. The difficult task we face is precisely to find the right balance among these diverse perceptions and players, in a way that best serves both our interests and our values.