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New 'Arab Street' Polls: United States Gaining Ground, Iran Losing

By [David Pollock](#)

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Several new polls suggest that the United States is gaining ground in the Arab street, and that President Barack Obama's latest overtures, specifically his June 4 speech in Cairo, were well received by some important Arab constituencies. Although a great deal of skepticism remains, students of Arab public opinion would regard these numbers as surprisingly encouraging. In contrast, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad's popularity has slipped dramatically in the Arab world, with many saying that the outcome of Iran's recent presidential election will hurt the region. Approximately half of the Arabs questioned even agree that "if Iran does not accept new restrictions and more international oversight of its nuclear program, the Arabs should support stronger sanctions against Iran around the end of this year."

Polling Difficulty in the Middle East

If the Middle East were more like the United States or Europe, an overnight phone poll would provide immediate answers to important questions. The reality is that phone polls in the region are notoriously unreliable and that most individual polls, however elaborate or well intended, are inevitably suspect of government interference, social bias, or other distortions. Still, if evidence from several different pollsters can be gathered, evaluated, and compared, some reasonable and even significant judgments can be rendered. This is precisely the case today when comparatively solid (and in great measure previously unpublished) data of this kind are at hand for three key Arab societies: Egyptians, Jordanians, and Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.

The data in question derive from three different sources, all using in-person rather than phone or online interviews: the Washington-based Zogby International, the Ramallah-based Palestinian AWRAD Institute, and the Princeton-based Pechter Middle East Polls. This last is a new entrant on the scene, but one whose fieldwork is conducted by a very experienced, professional, and completely apolitical regional commercial survey firm -- and unlike most other polls in the region, without any government sponsorship or supervision.

The latest Zogby Arab poll was conducted in March and April, several months before Obama's speech and the Iran election, and has had more than its share of methodological problems (including heavily loaded questions) in the past. Still, it provides some context for assessing which issues resonate most in certain Arab societies, with sometimes surprising findings. More up to date and reliable was a West Bank/Gaza poll conducted June 12-14 by the nonpartisan AWRAD institute headed by Dr. Nader Said. A poll conducted from June 15 to 28 in Egypt and Jordan by Pechter Middle East Polls provides the most recent and in many respects the most interesting data.

Poll Findings

Top priorities get mixed reviews. Zogby identified three issues as today's highest priorities for changes in U.S. policy: the withdrawal of troops from Iraq, the closure of the Guantanamo Bay prison and end of torture, and improvement in U.S. treatment of Muslims in general. On these three issues, Obama's Cairo statements are rated in the new Pechter poll as "somewhat credible" by 30 to 40 percent of the Egyptian and Jordanian

respondents. Obama's remarks on U.S. policy toward democracy in the region garner similar credibility: 40 percent in Egypt and 30 percent in Jordan. Among West Bank/Gaza Palestinians, as measured in the latest AWRAD poll, the president's credibility on the broadest of these issues is higher: just over half (53 percent) say he is at least "somewhat serious" in his call for "a new beginning" in U.S.-Muslim relations.

Overall U.S. ratings higher than before. More broadly, views of the United States are considerably more positive in the new Pechter poll than in others reported in recent months (especially in Egypt, possibly in part as a result of Obama's visit there). Among Egyptians, 38 percent proffer at least a somewhat favorable opinion of the United States, a very large gain of about 20 points over comparable figures last year. The current "favorable U.S. image" figure for Jordanians, at 25 percent, shows a smaller improvement, yet twice as many Jordanians (53 percent) think it is "important for Arab governments to maintain good relations with the United States." This is a revealing set of answers to the kind of practical questions that are almost never asked in other Arab polls.

Ahmadinezhad's sinking popularity, growing support for sanctions. In sharp contrast to the impression created by previous Zogby presentations, Ahmadinezhad garnered very few votes as "most admired foreign political leader" in Egypt (6 percent) and in Jordan (8 percent). Hugo Chavez, another supposed favorite in the latest Zogby poll, attracted even fewer votes -- a mere 4 percent in Egypt, and 7 percent in Jordan. By comparison, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia and King Abdullah II of Jordan each garnered about 10 percent in Egypt, according to the Pechter poll, and lead a slew of other moderates to a combined plurality of 45 percent in this "most admired" category.

In a similar vein, an impressive two-thirds of Egyptians say that the outcome of Iran's June 12 presidential election will hurt, not help, the region. The corresponding percentage is lower in Jordan, but it is still a majority (55 percent). Forty-nine percent of Egyptians say Arabs should support more sanctions against Iran if it refuses new limits on its nuclear program in 2009, and nearly as many (42 percent) Jordanians say the same. This is a marked change from earlier polls, which generally reported Arab publics opposing international pressure on Iran.

A Window of Opportunity in the Arab Street

Those polled do not belong to democracies in which public opinion could plausibly vote the ruler out of power, or even exert enough pressure on the government to alter its basic policies. But "on the margins," as President Obama phrased it in an interview shortly before his Cairo trip, shifts in popular attitudes could make a marked difference in the ability of these governments to cooperate with the United States on important issues.

In the wake of Obama's encouraging statements and the discouraging news from Iran, these latest surveys strongly suggest that Washington currently enjoys an opportunity to nudge Arab publics and policies in a desirable direction. But more surprising, and equally urgent, is that while most Arab governments are known to fear and distrust Iran, Washington now knows that most ordinary Egyptians and Jordanians, among others, share these sentiments.

With this in mind, the United States should adjust its regional diplomacy to emphasize opposition to, and not just engagement with, Iran's regime. Washington should accelerate and publicize defensive military cooperation with friendly Arab countries, including wider participation in the Proliferation Security Initiative aimed at obstructing Iran's nuclear program. The United States should also intensify its efforts to spur Arab governments to enforce stricter controls on Iranian trade and financial transactions, particularly in the Gulf. Even as Washington invites Tehran to the negotiating table, the U.S. administration should actively prepare to enlist Arab support for further sanctions against Iran, which will probably prove necessary in the coming months. In addition, Washington should encourage discreet Arab lobbying of Iran's major energy business partners in Europe and Asia. This balanced approach is the one best calculated to secure useful support from the Arab street, as well as the Arab elite.

David Pollock is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of its 2008 Policy Focus [Slippery Polls: Uses and Abuses of Opinion Surveys from Arab States](#).

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