

PolicyWatch #1641 : Special Forum Report

Actions, Not Just Attitudes: A New Way to Assess U.S.-Arab Relations

Featuring [David Pollock](#) and Marc Lynch
March 15, 2010

On March 11, 2010, David Pollock and Marc Lynch addressed a special Policy Forum luncheon at The Washington Institute to discuss Dr. Pollock's forthcoming study Actions, Not Just Attitudes: A New Paradigm for U.S.-Arab Relations. Dr. Pollock is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and a former senior advisor for the Broader Middle East at the State Department. Dr. Lynch is director of the Institute for Middle East Studies and associate professor of political science and international affairs at George Washington University. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

David Pollock

Public opinion polls and the media tell us that Arabs disliked the George W. Bush administration and have high hopes for President Barack Obama. Indeed, the new administration enjoyed majority Arab approval ratings throughout 2009 (up to 50 percentage points higher than his predecessor), while the overall U.S. image in Arab countries also recovered significantly. Yet the question remains: what is the record of actual Arab behavior toward the United States? This question was the starting point of the forthcoming study, which presents a new model for understanding U.S.-Arab relations since the Clinton administration -- one that emphasizes actions much more than attitudes.

The report's often-counterintuitive findings indicate that souring Arab attitudes toward the United States during the Bush years -- and their subsequent warming under Obama -- have had only a minimal effect on the actual behavior of Arab governments and publics. This conclusion is based on ten years of data from nineteen different Arab countries and the Palestinian Authority. The resultant "Arab Behavioral Index" and "Arab Reform Index" measure both official and popular Arab ties with the United States (e.g., arms sales, UN voting patterns, bilateral trade, consumer goods purchases, visa issuance, Arab enrollment in U.S. schools) as well as internal Arab political and economic reform. Methodological shortcomings aside, the important lesson from this exercise is clear: Arab attitudes and Arab actions can be very different.

To be sure, growing anti-American sentiment in the first two years of the Bush presidency did have some measurable impact on Arab political behavior, particularly in 2003. Far fewer Arab students enrolled in the United States, overall visa rates fell dramatically, Arab votes at the UN increasingly ran counter to American votes, U.S. arms sales to the region declined, and even overall bilateral trade suffered slightly, all while anti-American protests swelled. Nearly every category, however, saw rapid, solid, and sustained recovery -- not in 2009 following President Obama's "new beginning," but in 2004-2005, during the "profoundly unpopular" Bush presidency.

For example, around 539 significant anti-American public protests were reported across the region from 2000 to 2005, but only 132 were held from 2006 to 2009. In the economic sector, U.S. exports to Arab countries skyrocketed after 2003, reaching \$46.3 billion in 2008 compared to \$18.2 billion in 2000 (in constant dollars). This growth was especially impressive among clearly identifiable American consumer brands such as General

Motors, Kraft Foods, and Procter and Gamble. Similarly, Arab student enrollment rates in the United States have now climbed past the high point set at the beginning of the decade, while the number of Arab visitors has been rising steadily since 2004.

The United States also enjoyed enhanced military and counterterrorism cooperation with nearly every Arab country during the Bush years, from traditional friends (e.g., Egypt, Jordan, Gulf Cooperation Council members) to other countries (e.g., Algeria, Yemen). Furthermore, relations with Libya witnessed a complete turnaround, from pariah to potential partner (the same held true for Iraq, albeit at a very high price).

This is not to say that Bush administration policies had no cost, but rather that the cost was temporary, swiftly giving way to the mutual interest that underpins U.S.-Arab relations. In his June 2009 Cairo speech, President Obama asserted that these relations should be "based on mutual interest and mutual respect." But the evidence suggests that interest trumps respect.

This finding also has implications for Arab political and economic reform, which seems to have little or nothing to do with controversial U.S. policies toward Iraq or Israel. The heyday of Arab reform, roughly 2003-2006, was also the period when the United States was most actively promoting the reform agenda in the region. When U.S. pressure for internal reform abated in 2006, progress slowed or regressed in many countries.

Several factors help explain the large gap between Arabs' supposedly widespread anti-American attitudes and their actual behavior. First, it is important to recognize that most Arab governments are not accountable to their own publics; they want good relations with the United States, and they tend to obscure their extensive cooperation with Washington behind a media mask of anti-Americanism. At the popular level, most Arabs simply do not consider political relations with the United States personally important. As for purchasing U.S. consumer goods, Arabs either do not allow anti-American sentiment to influence their buying habits or else do not understand which products are American in origin.

Policymakers should keep this dichotomy between interests and attitudes in mind when determining U.S. strategy in the Middle East. Arab governments, like most others, will act in their own interests, and Arab citizens will do the same.

Marc Lynch

The basic insight behind *Actions, Not Just Attitudes* is both valid and important. Much of the recent research on Arab attitudes, regional media, and the internet's effects on the Arab world has been marked by a common shortcoming: the failure to demonstrate the link between attitudes and actual behavior, the very basis of behavioral social science. Therefore, this study is significant not only for its own sake, but also as the beginning of a much larger research program.

In the realm of political science, however, one must not undersell the already robust and growing academic literature on some of the behavioral indicators cited in this report, especially protest behavior and other manifestations of anti-Americanism. In other words, the study is not beginning from scratch -- it actually fits well into a growing body of knowledge and will hopefully help to bridge the divide between the academic and policy realms.

As for its content, the report is appropriately sensitive to the limitations inherent in the behavioral data presented. A surge in anti-American protests, for example, is not an unpolluted barometer of Arab opinion, as it indicates not only popular mobilization but also regimes' decision to allow the people into the streets. Using such indicators to draw larger conclusions is therefore bound to be problematic.

Nevertheless, the report's findings about Arab regime behavior are largely valid. The notion that Arab regimes are realist actors more concerned with their own survival than popular opinion may not be a new insight, but it

is an important one to reinforce. One must also recognize this behavior as a function of America's global standing. In an era of a single great power, Arab regimes have no place to go to express their dissent with U.S. policy -- except perhaps the United Nations, where they feel comfortable regularly voting against the United States.

At the popular level, however, Arab dissatisfaction and outright hostility toward American foreign policy has been more intense and enduring than the report suggests. Arabs have always distinguished between the American people and the U.S. government, and some of the behavioral indicators only confirm this truism. The increase in visa and student levels shows the reversion to a norm that seemed in jeopardy in 2003 -- a reassuring but not entirely surprising data point. Similarly, the expanding sales of consumer goods is not shocking -- the idea that economic behavior does not follow from popular attitudes is a general phenomenon not unique to the Arab world. Furthermore, if these trends are seen in the context of changing Bush administration policies and shifts in strategic communication circa 2006, then perhaps the lesson is that there actually is a link between U.S. policy and Arab behavior. Finally, in terms of outreach, one need not choose between mutual interest and mutual respect: the two concepts are mutually reinforcing.

This rapporteur's summary was prepared by Cole Bunzel..

Copyright 2010 The Washington Institute for Near East Policy