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How Do Arabs Perceive the West?

The short answer is that Arabs perceive the West, and the United States in particular, as technologically admirable; a destination for education, professional training, and medical treatment; morally corrupt, however; and, most importantly, politically incorrect. A survey-based study of nearly 10,000 respondents, published by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan and entitled, *Revisiting the Arab Street: Research from Within*, supports this fact. Political incorrectness is often associated with the U.S. and British policies in the Middle East. France, on the other hand, while identical to the United States and the United Kingdom in cultural perception amongst Arabs, is not perceived as politically incorrect.

Contrary to widespread media representations, religion is not the basis of tensions between Arabs and the West. Most Arabs do not view the West or the United States as following a policy driven by religious forces. The notion of a “crusader war” is largely dismissed. At the same time, Arab attitudes toward a role for *Shari’a* in legislation and support for or against openness in *Ijtihad* are not the driving force behind the formulation of their attitudes toward the West. In short, there is little empirical evidence for the portrayal of Arab-Western hostilities as a religious conflict. Arabs hold coherent notions of what constitutes the values of Western and Arab societies. They associate the West with values of individual liberty and accumulation of wealth, while they view their own societal values as placing emphasis on religion and family.

Many Arabs perceive important differences between the cultures and societies of the Arab world and the West. Arabs across the region hold more complex and nuanced views than what may be expected. Most significantly, the study identifies Arab reaction to Western, and most specifically U.S., foreign policy in the region as being the single most important factor influencing Arab opinions about the West.

Arab perceptions of Western values do not determine their attitudes toward Western foreign policies. They hold negative attitudes toward foreign policies of the United States and Britain and positive attitudes toward those of France, but these attitudes are not related to any significant differences in the perceived societal values of the three countries.

The Arab world does not reject the professed goals of the West’s foreign policies toward the Arab world. Indeed, there is great support for the liberal democratic principles expressed by Western leaders. Arabs object to Western actions,

Upcoming Strategy Hour

50th Anniversary of the Hungarian Revolution

21 November 2006
3CR – 9:00am

Featured speakers:

Iona Teleki, Deputy Director, New European
Democracies Program,
Fellow, Europe Program ■

Adrienn Petrovics, Research Intern, New
European Democracies Program ■

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however, because the “situation on the ground” is in contrast to the professed principles.

Arabs disagree fundamentally with U.S. positions on issues such as the definition of terrorism, policies toward the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the Iraq War. They have little confidence in U.S.-led efforts to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict, and they largely see the U.S.-led war in Iraq as unjustified. In addition, many fundamentally disagree with the U.S. definition of terrorism, often viewing the actions of groups that the United States identifies as “terrorist” as being legitimate responses to aggression or occupation.

Despite these disagreements and disillusionments, particularly with regard to the United States, many Arabs desire stronger relations between their countries and the West. This is especially true of cultural and economic relations, which are viewed as less potentially problematic than political relations. Particularly, business and media elites are most likely to seek stronger bilateral ties between their countries and the West, even though they are also most likely to openly express disagreement with U.S. policies.

Arab dissatisfaction with U.S. policies is unlikely to diminish in the absence of significant foreign policy changes. Foreign policy, as exemplified most significantly by the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Iraq War, is at the basis of fundamental tensions with the West and with the United States in particular. This finding is consistent across all the countries studied and in all demographic groups. Negative sentiments are particularly strong among youth and non-elites, who disapprove of U.S. policies, are skeptical of U.S. intentions in the region, and are most likely to reject strengthened bilateral ties. Given the demographic trends in the region, whereby 50 percent of the population is less than 25 years of age, there is little reason to believe that these attitudes will dissipate without changes in U.S. foreign policy.

Respondents in Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine were found not to perceive the West as a unified whole. Rather, they differentiated between countries, particularly with regard to politics. For example, the Arab public views France much more positively than it does either the United States or the United Kingdom, primarily because there is a more positive perception about French foreign policy in the Middle East.

Contrary to what some observers, particularly in the United States, have suggested, Arabs do not uniformly see the West in entirely negative terms. Indeed, they have a high value for many of the attributes associated with Western countries and societies. Arab public opinion does not view the tension between the Arab world and the West in either cultural or religious terms. Despite views frequently promulgated both inside and outside the region, Arabs do not see that there is an ongoing struggle between “crusaders and Muslims,” nor do they support the notion of a “clash of civilizations.” Rather, they differentiate significantly between states, particularly with regard to politics.

This study finds that Arabs do not “hate” the United States and UK for “who they are” or for the cultural values they hold. Negative sentiments are being fueled, rather, by “what they do”—that is, by specific policies and the impact these policies have on the Arab world.

■ *Fares Braizat, a Visiting Fellow in the Middle East Program, led a Strategy Hour on November 2, presenting his research depicting Arab perception of the U.S. and the West.*

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