

Public Opinion Survey Research and Public Diplomacy

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How can the new phenomenon of widespread scientific surveys of Arab and Muslim public opinion affect the practice of public diplomacy? As with mainstream political scientists who long avoided the Middle East because of the paucity of survey research, the new surfeit of survey research dramatically changes the opportunities for public diplomacy practitioners to engage with public opinion in targeted countries. Traditionally, the absence of regular, high quality public opinion polls allowed anyone to project his/her own biases and hopes on to an imagined “Arab street.” Academics, journalists, and governments tracked local public opinion through anecdotal evidence or through often overriding analytical assumptions. Arab governments, with their widespread surveillance and well-developed instruments of ideological control over their own societies had their own methods of determining public opinion which had little to do with scientific random sampling. The absence of independent evidence made it possible for a variety of political actors to claim the right to speak on behalf of this street: whether governments or political party leaders or outspoken pundits. Crude measures such as the ability of Nasser to incite protestors into the streets, or the musings of the ubiquitous English-speaking taxi driver, took the place of systematic analysis.

This situation has changed dramatically.¹ By the second half of the 1990s, surveys took place in select Arab countries with increasing regularity. The US Government conducted its own survey research where possible, though this information was not generally released to the public. After 9/11, international research agencies such as Pew and Gallup began carrying out major cross-national survey research on a wide range of questions of concern to American foreign policy. Individual academics and a wide range of US government agencies also began to carry out survey research, including an upgraded Arab component of the World Values Survey and a number of National Science Foundation supported single country and multi-country studies. Since the invasion of Iraq an enormous

amount of survey research has been carried out in an attempt to understand Iraqi public opinion. As a result, we now have a far more rigorous and useful set of data on Arab and Muslim public opinion than ever before.

This avalanche of survey research creates unique opportunities for public diplomacy practitioners, but also some real dangers. Successful public diplomacy must have accurate information about the attitudes, ideas, and preferences of target audiences, which survey research can offer...up to a point. As Mark Tessler puts it, “public diplomacy...will succeed only if guided by a proper understanding of the attitudes and orientations of Arab and Muslim publics. Such an understanding requires attention not only to *what* people think but also to *why* they hold particular views.”² On the positive side, survey research means that instead of having to depend on local interlocutors or on impressionistic readings of trends in local public opinion, public diplomacy practitioners can now draw on a growing body of scientific, methodologically rigorous research. Regular survey research allows trend-lines to be discerned, rather than capturing only an isolated snapshot. It can assist the crafting of new public diplomacy campaigns and provide feedback on the success of earlier campaigns.

But there is a real risk that the ready availability of survey research will distract policy makers from placing those findings into their appropriate political context. Public opinion survey research must be embedded in appropriate theories of why and how this public opinion matters, so that policy makers know which results matter and which can safely be ignored. The deluge of survey information can overwhelm the policymaker. The scientific allure of survey research might also lead policymakers to unjustifiably discount other sources of information about public opinion, such as media analysis or the interpretations of informed analysts. It might lead to misreadings of the real concerns of Arab and Muslim publics, since the questions tend to ask about things that matter to us rather than asking what really matters to them. And perhaps most crucially, the availability of survey research may lead public diplomacy professionals to place less importance on direct dialogue with Arab interlocutors. The real methodological problems facing any public opinion survey in the Arab world—as well as the particular shortcomings of specific surveys—merit more than the token nod that they usually receive.

Fouad Ajami famously dismissed the Pew Global Attitudes Survey findings by observing that, “there is no need to go so far away from home only to count the cats in Zanzibar.”³ But this withering, and politically useful, cynicism misses the real value of such surveys. From April 9-11, 2006, the USC Center on Public Diplomacy and the Pew Research Center organized a forum to discuss the issues raised by this new public opinion survey research for public diplomacy scholars and practitioners. This working paper draws on the discussions at that workshop,

which included both scholars and practitioners, to lay out the current state of the field of survey research in the Middle East, examine some of these shortcomings and possibilities, and offer some recommendations for the future.

THE EXPLOSION OF SURVEY RESEARCH

The explosion of survey research in the Arab world is nothing short of astonishing. As recently as the late 1980s, the idea of conducting scientific surveys of public opinion about controversial political issues would have been virtually unthinkable. In some Arab countries opinion surveys have now become routine occurrences. Some researchers are beginning to carry out survey research in even the most controlled settings, such as Saudi Arabia and Iran. The proliferation of surveys has a number of implications in and of itself. It means that in many countries there exists now an infrastructure to support additional surveys (either on their own behalf or as contractors for the US government or independent organizations): reliable frames of the appropriate population, trained investigators, and developed methodologies. It also means that respondents, having seen the results of such surveys published in local newspapers and widely discussed in the media, are more likely to be forthcoming in responding to sensitive questions. Finally, it means that local policy makers and opinion leaders are better informed about the attitudes of domestic publics—as are those publics themselves.

In the 1990s, a number of pioneering Arab researchers began carrying out scientific research on local public opinion—some of which was released to the public and some of which was used by governments for their internal policy formation. The cats, one might say, have long since begun counting themselves. The Center for Strategic Studies (CSS) at the University of Jordan broke ground with its polling unit in the early 1990s.⁴ With regular surveys (e.g. the annual “Democracy in Jordan survey” and polls measuring expectations for, and 100-day evaluations of each new government) as well as controversial studies such as a 1995 survey on Jordanian-Palestinian relations, the CSS established public opinion survey research as a regular part of the political landscape. Jordanian governments, for their part, have relied heavily on opinion surveys in crafting domestic policy. In 2004, the new liberal daily newspaper *al-Ghad* began commissioning its own public opinion surveys (using Ipsos-Stat). The Jordan Center for Social Research (headed by Musa al-Shtawi) has recently begun regular public opinion surveys, in part as a contractor for the International Republican Institute.⁵

Other Arab countries also developed a tradition of survey research. In the Palestinian areas, Khalil Shikaki’s Nablus-based Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research has carried out more than 100 opinion surveys since 1993. These surveys, at least potentially, helped Israel and the United States formulate

their peacemaking policies, and had some impact on world public opinion about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; at least once, Shikaki's findings caused him serious trouble with Palestinian radicals upset with the political implications of his findings.⁶ The Al-Ahram Center in Egypt carried out some survey research beginning in the 1990s but largely focused on "safe" issues such as economics and Arab integration.⁷ In 2004, Nawaf Obeid published the results of the first officially sanctioned political public opinion poll in Saudi Arabia, revealing widespread support for reform (85% in favor) but little support for liberals (only 11.8% expressed positive views), along with continuing support for Osama bin Laden's ideas (49%, down from 96% support reported in a study by Saudi intelligence shortly after 9/11).⁸ Finally, Iraq under American occupation and afterwards has become perhaps the most heavily surveyed Arab country in history, with a vast array of opinion surveys carried out by US government and private organizations alike.⁹

The US government administers its own survey research in the Arab world as well. This polling of international opinion preceded 9/11, contrary to popular belief. Participants in the Public Diplomacy and World Opinion Forum described the sophisticated polling conducted by the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), including research on segmentation analysis and opinion changers. After the Hamas electoral victory in January, for instance, it was widely reported that INR's pre-election surveys had quite accurately forecast the outcome.¹⁰ This research is generally not made available to the public, which INR representatives at the Forum defended as the best way to ensure its non-partisan nature and to prevent its manipulation or exploitation for political ends. The Pentagon also carries out considerable survey research, particularly on "force protection" issues (though we really do not know its extent or subjects). USAID surveys tend to focus on issues of concern to development, such as health, democracy, effectiveness of aid programs; recent surveys have reportedly begun to ask about public perceptions and awareness of American aid programs. American NGOs also sponsor opinion surveys. The International Republican Institute, for instance, sponsored surveys (usually in collaboration with local partners) in Jordan, Morocco, Kuwait, Iraq, the Palestinian areas, and Lebanon.¹¹

The Arab world has also been included in a number of large-scale cross-national opinion research projects, beyond the Pew and Gallup studies discussed below. The massive multi-country World Values Survey only included its first Arab countries in the fourth wave (1999-2002).¹² Jordan's CSS oversaw a 2005 cross-national study of five Arab countries, in collaboration with local partners.¹³

While it is still more common for academics to concentrate on systematically analyzing the data generated by others, some academics have either carried out

their own original survey research. Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland, in collaboration with Zogby International, has conducted half a dozen surveys in six Arab countries since the summer of 2001.¹⁴ Mark Tessler of the University of Michigan has administered NSF supported surveys in Algeria, Jordan, Palestine (2003–2004), and in Iraq (December 2004). In 2002, Mansor Moaddel followed up on the 2000 World Values Survey with a second round of surveys in Egypt, Iran, Jordan and a first round of surveys in Morocco.¹⁵ Finally, and perhaps most excitingly, the new “Arab Barometer Project” organized by Tessler and Amaney Jamal (with start-up money from the Middle East Partnership Initiative) brings together local scholars in Morocco, Algeria, Palestine, Jordan, and Kuwait to carry out regular survey research comparable to existing Democracy Barometer projects in Africa, Latin America, and Southeast Asia.¹⁶

By far the greatest change in the field of opinion surveys, however, has been the large-scale entry into the Arab world after 9/11 by Gallup and Pew. Gallup’s 2002 survey, the first out of the gate, continues to be widely used by academics doing secondary analysis of the data.¹⁷ In 2005, Craig Charney used focus groups rather than opinion surveys to get a more textured sense of Muslim attitudes towards America.¹⁸ Finally, the Pew Global Attitudes Survey has had the most impact of all.¹⁹ Its findings of a collapse in support for America framed the influential 2003 report of the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy, and its regular surveys of Arab and Muslim public opinion have become the ‘gold standard’ in public debate about anti-Americanism.

FINDINGS OF PUBLIC OPINION SURVEYS

Evidence of widespread anti-American attitudes has been the most consistently scrutinized and widely influential finding of this research. The Pew Global Attitudes Project’s widely publicized 2003 report that “the bottom has fallen out” of America’s support in the Arab and Muslim worlds galvanized public and policy attention. Findings that fewer than 5% of Jordanians and Egyptians approved of America were indeed eye-catching.²⁰ Zogby and Telhami similarly found in February 2003 that 4% of Saudis approved of America, along with 6% of Moroccans and Jordanians, 13% of Egyptians, and 32% of Lebanese (divided sharply along confessional lines).²¹ That these findings had such impact is worth reflecting upon. The Pew Global Attitudes Survey did not reveal anything that regional experts had not already written. But the scientific sheen of the numbers captured the public imagination and the policy agenda in ways that such writings could not—even if the quality of information produced by the regional experts, including its political context and local social meaning, might well have been better for most policy purposes.

While this information about attitudes towards America is often taken as the most important information for public diplomacy, I would argue that other information is actually more useful. Measures of anti-Americanism do not tell policy-makers the causes of these attitudes; even self-reported findings, such as a Zogby question in which overwhelming majorities said that their hostility was driven by policy rather than by culture, should be taken with a grain of salt. Policy practitioners should be concerned about the headline numbers, but must look deeper to find what is most useful for policy formation. For instance, opinion survey research has demonstrated deep and broad support for democracy, widespread opposition to American foreign policy, deeply ingrained doubts about American credibility, conflicted feelings about radical Islam and terrorism, and deep divisions over the appropriate role of religion in political life. Surveys have revealed both striking continuities across the Arab world on certain issues and vast differences on others—which should help the public diplomacy practitioner to identify which issues can be addressed effectively at the regional level and which are better dealt with on a country-by-country basis.

Instead of rehearsing the well-trod terrain of anti-Americanism, in this section I instead review the contributions of public opinion survey research to questions of public diplomacy in two key issue domains: democracy and terrorism.

Democracy:

The findings about Arab support for the idea of *democracy* are both unequivocal and non-obvious. As Mark Tessler concluded from a review of 15 different data sets, using a wide range of questions and samples, “in not a single case was there a statistically significant relationship between attitudes toward democracy and the personal involvement of Muslim respondents with their religion.”²² This is the sort of finding—overwhelmingly one-sided, replicated in a wide range of surveys using different methods, and decisively supporting one side of a contentious theoretical and policy-relevant debate—which should influence not only public diplomacy but also policy more generally. It demolishes long-held prejudices about the incompatibility of Arab culture or Islam with democratic values.²³

But if those findings demonstrate an opening for public diplomacy, they also illustrate some of the risks of leaping to conclusions on their basis. The surveys show clearly that promoting democracy was one area where American ideals and Arab aspirations overlapped: something not true of virtually any other American foreign policy interest. But at the same time, the evidence of America’s profound lack of credibility on the issue should have been given equal weight. Credibility should be seen as a “master variable” which influences the reception of a very wide range of policy areas. For instance, after the United States began talking

extensively about the need for Arab democracy (and also after it made the creation of a democratic Iraq part of its justification for the war) a number of surveys asked about the reality of America's commitment to Arab democracy. In a May 2004 Telhami/Zogby survey, 25% of Jordanians thought that democracy was an important motive for the invasion of Iraq, along with 6% of Moroccans, 44% of Lebanese, 7% of Saudis, 5% of the UAE, and 8% of Egyptians.²⁴ In an October 2005 Telhami/Zogby survey, only 6% thought that American democracy promotion was a real objective which would make a difference, while 16% said it was the right goal pursued the wrong way, and 69% said that democracy was not really an American objective.²⁵

Such survey research could have helped American public diplomacy realize that it did not need to "sell" democracy to the Arab public, but rather to convince a skeptical audience of American bona fides on the issue.

Looking more closely at surveys about democracy in Jordan can illustrate some of the possibilities and pitfalls for public diplomacy professionals. Jordanians expressed consistent enthusiasm for the principle of democracy (98% in one of the Tessler surveys) and the belief that democracy could work well in the country (74% in the 2006 Pew survey).²⁶ Surveys also show limited satisfaction with the current state of affairs, suggesting that Jordan is a country ripe for American democracy promotion efforts. The annual CSS "Democracy in Jordan" survey has shown a steady decline in public perception of Jordanian democracy. In the 2005 CSS survey, 51% of Jordanians said that Jordan was a democratic country, while overwhelming numbers say that they want Jordan to be a democratic country.²⁷ But beyond this general admiration for democracy, how pressing were such concerns for the average Jordanian? Repeated surveys show citizens to be far more concerned with economic issues than with political democracy.²⁸ CSS also found that very few Jordanians were members of political parties, and few valued any of the institutions upon which democracy promotion would presumably focus (political parties, Parliament, civil society, the professional associations). One aspect of "democracy" registered more strongly in these surveys: 77% in a 2005 survey said that they were not able to criticize the government or differ with its opinions publicly without fear of reprisals by the security services against themselves or their families. "Freedom of the press" ranked first among the freedoms which need to be protected, at 62%, while "freedom of opinion" was second at 61%.²⁹ So survey research might tell policymakers that Jordanians *value* democracy but don't rank it *highly*, and they care quite a lot about public freedoms and economic issues. Knowing the permutations of priorities in different countries may be more useful to policy makers than are the headline numbers.

Terrorism

Since 9/11, building a global norm against terrorism has been a major American foreign policy objective. Pew surveys and others have very usefully tracked shifting ideas about the legitimacy of terrorism employed against different targets (e.g. Americans, Israelis, and other Muslims), and the popularity of bin Laden and other Islamist figures. These findings should be extremely useful to the public diplomacy practitioner, again within important limits. These numbers tell us little about the actual likelihood of terrorism, since such acts are typically carried out by very small, highly motivated groups who are not likely to be captured even by the best survey methodology. But they do tell us some things of real importance.

Survey research can measure the extent of passive or active support for groups using terrorism, which gets to the environment within which terrorists must operate. It also can help determine progress towards establishing moral norms against terrorism. For instance, the 2005 and 2006 Pew surveys asked a series of questions about when violence against civilians would be considered legitimate. Asked whether such violence would be legitimate to “defend Islam,” 43% of Jordanians said “often/sometimes” in 2002, 47% in 2005, but only 29% in 2006 (28% said “often/sometimes” in Egypt in 2006). Those who responded never” went from 26% in 2002 to 11% in 2005 to 43% in 2006.³⁰

Opinion surveys have been instrumental in shaping our understanding of how different kinds of terrorism affect Arab attitudes. In summer 2005, when much of the world seemed to be losing interest in al-Qaeda, Jordanians expressed even greater confidence in bin Laden than in the past (60%, up from 55% in the previous survey), while only 10% saw “Islamic extremism” as a threat to their country.³¹ After Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s organization bombed several tourist hotels in Amman in November 2005, surveys found dramatic shifts in opinion against Zarqawi and (to a lesser extent) bin Laden. An *al-Ghad* survey carried out less than a week after the attacks found that 64% of Jordanians said that their view of al-Qaeda has changed for the worse because of the Amman terror attacks: 78% said that their view of al-Qaeda was “very bad,” and only 1.5% “very good;” 87% now considered al-Qaeda a “terrorist organization;” and 86.5% said that terrorism should be condemned absolutely. A few weeks later, a CSS survey on attitudes towards terrorism found that the percentage of respondents who consider Al Qaeda a legitimate resistance group had dropped from 66.8% in 2004 to 20% in 2005.³²

The CSS surveys distinguish between the mass public and “opinion leaders,” offering an interesting dynamic. The opinion leaders (perhaps more politically aware, perhaps more susceptible to regime persuasion or likely to see things the King’s way), in 2005 overwhelmingly saw bin Laden’s Al Qaeda (73.4 %) as a

terrorist organization, while only half (48.9%) of the national sample respondents agreed. And spillover to other domains was limited: 63.6% in 2005 considered armed military operations carried out against US troops in Iraq as “not terrorist,” a drop of less than 5 percentage points. A series of surveys in 2006 then found something of a reversion to the status quo, as the shock of the hotel bombing faded, and Jordan’s government led a public campaign against the far more popular Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood. A 2006 CSS survey found that 72% of Jordanians now considered Zarqawi’s organization a terrorist one – high, but a 13% drop over five months. In June 2006, an Ipsos-Stat opinion survey found that 59% of Jordanians described Zarqawi as a “terrorist” and 67% refused to describe him as a martyr.³³ But there were sharp class and ethnic divides: 76.6% of those over the age of 60 described Zarqawi as a terrorist, compared to 54.5% of youth; and 77.6% of residents of the upscale West Amman describe Zarqawi as a terrorist, compared to 51.7% of the poorer residents of East Amman.

These shifts in mass attitudes may help us to understand and even forecast the strategy of terrorist groups. If al-Qaeda believes that attacks targeting Shia or civilians undermine their appeal then they may change those practices. The hard core of anti-American jihadis—the ones likely to resort to violence against American interests—hated America before those attitudes went mainstream, and would continue to do so even if the US dramatically increased its favorability ratings among mass publics. But reducing support for those tactics among the wider public might well cause them to alter their strategies to avoid losing their own public support. For an example of how survey research can be used for assessing terrorist strategies, Mia Bloom drew on a range of surveys of Palestinian public opinion to show how suicide terror attacks tracked domestic political trends and attitudes towards Israel and the peace process.³⁴

Similar studies in Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and elsewhere confirm the general trend that local terror attacks tend to undermine—at least temporarily—the universalistic appeal of radical Islamist ideas. All of this information is therefore of obvious use for anyone attempting to formulate a public diplomacy campaign likely to contribute to delegitimizing terrorism. This offers little direct policy guidance for American public diplomacy, however, since encouraging such attacks is obviously not on the agenda. Perhaps the lesson would be that American public diplomacy should stay out of the way in the aftermath of such terror attacks, allowing the local reaction to develop on its own terms.

USES AND MISUSES OF SURVEY RESEARCH FOR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

One danger in the proliferation of public opinion survey research is that it can too easily become a substitute for real understanding of the patterns of public opinion in the region. There is a risk of turning it into a horse race, or playing to the numbers because it is a metric we can use. It would be a mistake for American public diplomacy to be oriented primarily towards improving its favorable ratings in the Pew Global Attitudes Survey. Instead, it should focus upon using the survey data to construct policies—not only rhetoric—which can address real Arab concerns.

For opinion surveys to be useful, analysts need a theory of the role of public opinion in the political process.³⁵ This will matter differently at different times: certain foreign policy goals—such as the promotion of democracy, or the construction of a norm against terror—could not plausibly be achieved in isolation from foreign public opinion. Elite opinion may matter more than mass attitudes, for instance, for many policy domains.³⁶ Public opinion surveys privilege the uninformed, unmobilized masses over activists—which can be problematic if activists (or elites) in fact have a greater role in shaping political outcomes. For instance, during the summer of 2005 the Jordanian press and political salons were consumed by a heated political standoff over the confirmation of new Prime Minister Adnan Badran. An opinion poll found that 72.1% of Jordanians had not heard about the crisis—suggesting that for all its heat and intensity within the political elite (65.8% of those who had heard of the crisis said they were interested in the story), it hadn't really penetrated into the wider public consciousness.³⁷ What would American public diplomacy gain from knowing this? Perhaps that a crisis generating great press attention was not all that important to Jordanians at large. But it would be a mistake to think that it therefore was not important—since the political class and opinion leaders matter more than do the mass public in this widely depoliticized country.

The results of opinion surveys need to be placed into the context of other sources of information, with triangulation among multiple streams of information. The artificial certainty offered by numbers can seduce even knowledgeable observers; for the novice, they can be overwhelming. But survey research does not put numbers into storylines or narratives which make sense of the mass of data. Practitioners still need interpretation for that. The distribution of opinions expressed on Arab satellite television may be a more useful indicator of politically relevant attitudes than the opinions collected in opinion surveys.³⁸ In the case of Iraq before the war, survey research may have been actively misleading. Surveys showed overwhelming opposition to American invasion of Iraq, which led most analysts to stop asking questions about an Arab opinion presumed to

be unchangeable (if not irrational). But following Arab talk shows, op-eds and internet forums might have revealed that beyond the binary “yes/no” format of most opinion surveys, many Arabs would have been happy to see Saddam go, just not through an American invasion. The real story was skepticism about the US and its motives, not about support for Saddam. But the surveys didn’t necessarily ask the right questions, or allow Arabs to explain their own positions, only to choose among pre-determined responses.

Another concern is that public opinion surveys can actually create an artificial “opinion” among respondents who in fact have never thought about matters in those ways. Often we ask questions which matter to us, but which might not be what matters to them. Asking the same question across multiple countries can be essential for cross-national comparisons, and should not be eliminated. But to really get useful information for public diplomacy in a specific country, survey questions should be carefully designed in response to the local political discourse and tested to ensure that the questions are effectively measuring actual opinions rather than imposing or inventing them.

Other issues are more prosaic, but important. One is the opportunity cost created by increased survey research. High quality survey research is expensive, although economies of scale and sunk costs have helped. The State Department has a very limited budget for survey research (i.e. INR), while the DOD has unlimited resources but a different agenda. This means that polling must be selective, and focused on producing the most useful kinds of information. A number of participants in the USC Forum emphasized that surveys could be most useful for defining the field itself—who and what you need to win, who is persuadable, who to communicate with—offering a broad overview of what publics think and how audiences are segmented.

Even for the most credible, nonpartisan research there are continuing methodology fears. The Gallup and Pew surveys are without question the two most highly regarded in the field: highly professional, face to face interviews, no expense spared. But even those two organizations have found widely discrepant results when asking very similar questions in the same countries. Others are less scrupulous, or operate under tight budget constraints: telephone rather than face to face interviews, short interview protocols that do not allow time to build trust, interviews in public places, convenience sampling, an unacknowledged urban bias. Certain countries tend to be over-represented in survey research, due to their importance for American policy or the availability of local partners (such as Jordan), while others are consistently absent. Bad data can drive out good, especially when its public release is itself an attempt to influence public opinion.

Finally, despite the explosion of survey research noted above, the realities of life

in a *mukhabarat* (secret police) state should never be discounted. On the one hand, interviewers for these surveys have anecdotally reported that participants are often thrilled to have the chance to express their opinion and be heard. But respondents in such societies will have real doubts about the confidentiality of their answers, and will very likely attempt to anticipate the correct (or safe) answers. How many Jordanians, whatever their true feelings, were likely to tell an unknown telephone interviewer of their admiration for Zarqawi immediately after the Amman hotel bombings, or immediately after four members of Parliament had been very publicly arrested and charged with incitement for praising the deceased al-Qaeda leader? In other words, the surveys may be measuring what people think others want to hear rather than real opinions—which is useful information to have, but which should not be confused with the other. In the words of one liberal Jordanian columnist, “the truth is that these surveys continue to give results that it is difficult to do anything with...The numbers rise and fall without any comprehensible justification, especially in the political realm. This is not the fault of the surveyors, who follow professional standards and methods, but *because of the absence of a real political life*.”³⁹

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC DIPLOMACY

While the Pew data on anti-Americanism caught the eye, the prior question of the significance of those mass attitudes has remained under-explored. Did growing hostility among foreign publics matter in concrete ways? Was resentment of America simply the natural product of American supremacy? Even if the surveys identified the reasons for anti-American sentiment, did it make sense to adjust those policies in response to foreign opinion? The fashionable fixation with “moving the needle” with public diplomacy is badly misplaced: so many different factors go into the formation of public opinion that it will be rare that the effects of a public diplomacy campaign would register in public opinion surveys.⁴⁰ If the Pew Global Attitudes survey shows that 15% of Jordanians have favorable opinions of America compared to 21% the previous year, and 5% the year before that, what can or should a policymaker do with such information?

Just because a problem has been identified (i.e. mass anti-Americanism) does not mean that policy makers should try to solve it. No matter how well foreign public opinion might be measured, the national interest, domestic public opinion, and the attitudes of the leaders of key foreign states will most likely still matter more in the formation of policy. If responding to hostile public opinion would require policy changes that would be detrimental in some other way, then unpopularity might be a price worth paying. If the US could win practical support for its foreign policies from other governments (even if unpopular with publics),

would it matter if its unfavorable ratings remained high? A recent study by Peter Katzenstein and Robert Keohane, for instance, found that anti-Americanism in Europe made virtually no impact on the consumption of prominent American brands.⁴¹

Another problem is that opinion surveys might point towards things, which in practice would be impossible to execute. Findings of Arab perceptions of American non-religiosity suggest that a greater emphasis on America as a religious, conservative place might help. Hollywood, MTV, and the deluge of American popular culture would overwhelm any public diplomacy conducted along these lines. Or from another direction, it is clear that changing American policies towards Israel would have a major positive impact on Arab and Muslim public opinion, but such changes would not be likely given the prevailing conception of the American national interest and domestic public opinion. The Broadcasting Board of Governors spent heavily on survey research, but al-Hurra TV does not seem to have benefited from the information it received.

Knowledge of the preferences and attitudes of those publics would give policy makers information necessary for making effective decisions about the costs of prospective policies and their likely reception. But the explosion of public opinion survey research can actually give policy makers more information than they can act on, or else information which is of little use to the practical formation of policy.⁴² Officials say that the primary daily challenge is to integrate polling into policy channels, especially given the vast amount of other information and considerations that go into policy. INR's quite accurate forecast of the Hamas electoral victory did not seem to prepare the United States government for that outcome. At the USC Forum, most of the practitioners doubted the usefulness of survey research for designing major policy initiatives: they paint with too broad a brush and tell policy makers little about how publics will respond to changes in the status quo. Survey research is better at identifying constants—enduring themes, recurrent patterns—than at anticipating the response to dramatic new initiatives. Survey research practitioners at the Forum also warned about confusing a campaign model and a marketing model of survey research.

A better way to think of the policy use of survey research is as a diagnostic—checking the effects of policies, and providing warning signs of policy failure. The Pew numbers on exploding anti-Americanism helped to set a political and research agenda in ways which journalistic reporting and academic analysis had failed to do. Sharp discrepancies between survey research and other sources of information should set off warning bells—if opinion surveys showed widespread support for Hezbollah, say, at a time when much of the Arab media was filled with anti-Hezbollah rhetoric. Similarly, strong and repeatedly confirmed findings

which resolve an active debate should be taken seriously: for instance, the strong support for democracy among Arab and Muslim publics in a wide range of surveys decisively resolves an important policy debate about the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Moreover, the repeated finding that policy issues rather than culture drives anti-Americanism should have (but has not always) been used to formulate public diplomacy accordingly. Another potential use for survey research is to identify red zones of contention within public opinion. Rather than discovering the obvious (counting cats in Zanzibar)—that Arabs don't like Israel, or generally favor a role for Islam in politics—surveys could help to highlight areas of unexpected consensus (widespread support for democracy) and those on which no consensus exists and which people might be open to persuasion.

In the end, survey research should be seen as useful, but should not take an exaggerated role in public diplomacy. Don't play to the Pew numbers—but do look for areas of broad consensus and areas of contention (“red zone”) where interventions can make a difference. Don't overreact and dramatically change policy in response to survey numbers, but do take seriously major shifts of opinion in either direction and try to determine their causes. Do look for zones of overlap which public diplomacy can exploit—shared values, democracy promotion—but don't take those out of political context, at risk of formulating a campaign that fundamentally misses the point. If kept in its appropriate context, survey research should be an indispensable tool for effective policy-making, and help scholars and policymakers alike better understand Arab and Muslim attitudes.

- ¹ Mark Tessler, “Arab and Muslim Political Attitudes: Stereotypes and Evidence from Survey Research,” *International Studies Perspectives* 4, no. 2 (2003).
- ² Mark Tessler, “What American Public Diplomacy Should Know about the Attitudes of Ordinary Citizens in the Arab World?” in *In the Same Light as Slavery: Strengthening International Norms against Terrorism*, ed. Joseph McMillan (Washington: National Defense University Press, 2006, forthcoming).
- ³ Fouad Ajami, “The Falseness of Anti-Americanism,” *Foreign Policy* (September/October 2003), 54.
- ⁴ Mustafa Hamarneh, Director, Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan, interview by author; Fares Braizat, Coordinator of the Opinion Polling Unit at the Center of Strategic Studies, University of Jordan, interview by author; Ayman Safadi, editor, *al-Ghad*, Amman, Jordan, interview by author. CSS surveys are available from <http://www.css-jordan.org/>
- ⁵ These surveys can be found at the International Republican Institute website. See for example, Jordan Center for Social Research, *Democratic Transition and Political Reform in Jordan: National Public Opinion Poll #2*, (Amman, Jordan, December 26, 2005); available from <http://www.iri.org/02-07-06-JordanPoll.asp>
- ⁶ Eric Umansky, “Why a Mob Attacked the Most Rational Man in the Middle East,” *Columbia Journalism Review* (January 2004); available from <http://www.cjr.org/issues/2004/1/science-umansky.asp>. The Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research surveys are available from <http://www.pcpsr.org/>. A number of other organizations based in Jerusalem and Ramallah also carry out Palestinian survey research.