

**ISP POLICY FORUM: THE UNITED STATES AND THE  
MIDDLE EAST: A TENUOUS BALANCE?**

## **Arab and Muslim Political Attitudes: Stereotypes and Evidence from Survey Research**

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### **Images of Islam**

Although the administration of President George W. Bush insists that the U.S. War on Terrorism is not a war on Islam, too many Americans seem to view it that way. A national poll taken by the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research following the attack of September 11, 2001, found that 54 percent expressed the view that the attack was motivated by a conflict between Christianity and Islam.

Even more disturbing are the statements of some religious figures in the U.S. For example, Rev. Franklin Graham, son of Billy Graham and a well-known evangelist in his own right, said of Islam, "I believe it's a very evil and wicked religion." This and a sampling of other offensive references to Islam by prominent American conservatives are summarized by Nicholas Kristof in an important *New York Times* article published this summer.<sup>1</sup> Mr. Kristof concludes that if we expect Muslim leaders to confront the hate-mongers in their societies, we must confront those here in the U.S.

Yet another illustration is the reaction of some conservatives to a plan by the University of North Carolina to assign a book on Islam to incoming freshmen. The Family Policy Network, a conservative Christian organization, filed suit against the university. Fox News Network talk-show host Bill O'Reilly denounced the teaching of "our enemy's religion" and compared the assignment to teaching *Mein Kampf* in 1941.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, there is the well-known "Clash of Civilizations" thesis, in which Professor Samuel Huntington of Harvard argues that cultural and religious differences are a major cause of international conflict in the post-Cold War era and asserts that Islam in particular encourages Muslim aggressiveness toward non-Muslim peoples. According to Huntington, "Some Westerners have argued that the West does not have problems with Islam but only with violent Islamic extremists... But evidence to

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<sup>1</sup>Nicholas D. Kristof, "Bigotry in Islam—And Here," *New York Times*, July 9, 2002.

<sup>2</sup>*Democracy Now*, August 8, 2002. <http://www.webactive.com/pacifica/demnow/dn20020808.html>.

support [this assertion] is lacking...The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam ...”<sup>3</sup>

Such analyses posit Islam not only as a stimulus to aggressive and anti-Western sentiments, but also as the principal reason democracy has not taken root in Arab and many other Muslim-majority countries. As expressed by the late Elie Kedourie, a prominent student of the Middle East, the institutions and values associated with democracy are “profoundly alien to the Muslim political tradition.”<sup>4</sup>

These characterizations are not only troubling, they are also harmful. The idea that Islam is at the center of a fault-line dividing “the West and the Rest” leads us away from an understanding of attitudes in the Muslim world toward a broad array of issues—relations with the U.S., peace with Israel, democracy and domestic governance, and even Islamic political movements. To the extent we are concerned about our relations with Muslim majority countries, particularly, though not exclusively, those in the Arab world, we will be led astray if our perceptions and policies are guided by erroneous assumptions and stereotypes.

### Public Opinion Research in Arab and Muslim Countries

A number of recent opinion surveys in Arab and Islamic countries provide an opportunity for a more realistic look at the views of ordinary men and women, and at the factors that are shaping these attitudes and values. In the Arab world, there has been very little serious political attitude research until recently, which has made it difficult to challenge stereotypes about the “Arab street” and the “Arab mind.”

This has begun to change, however; a number of local scholars have done important work and several U.S. scholars and institutions have played an important role as well. Prominent among the former are Palestinian political scientist Khalil Shikaki, who directs the Center for Policy and Survey Research in Ramallah;<sup>5</sup> Mustafa Hamareneh, a Jordanian scholar who directs the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan;<sup>6</sup> and Hilal Khashan, a political scientist at the American University of Beirut.<sup>7</sup>

Among the latter is Ronald Inglehart of the University of Michigan. Inglehart directs the World Values Survey, which is supported in part by the National Science Foundation and has now been carried out in collaboration with local scholars in Turkey, Iran, and four Arab countries.<sup>8</sup> Another significant example is Eastern Michigan University sociologist Mansoor Moaddel, whose work has also been supported by the NSF.<sup>9</sup> Very important work has also been done by Zogby International, a private research institution that has recently surveyed attitudes about the United States and other issues in eight Muslim countries.<sup>10</sup> Finally, policy

<sup>3</sup>Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 209, 217.

<sup>4</sup>Elie Kedourie, *Democracy and Arab Political Culture* (London: Frank Cass, 1994), 5–6.

<sup>5</sup>Khalil Shikaki, *Palestinians Divided*, *Foreign Affairs* (January-February 2002).

<sup>6</sup>“Jordanian Opinion Survey Regarding Jordanian-Palestinian Relations” [Arabic]. Aman: Jordan University Center for Strategic Studies, 1995.

<sup>7</sup>Khashan, Hilal, *Partner or Pariah: Attitudes Toward Israel in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1996).

<sup>8</sup>Poppa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, “Islam and the West: Testing the Clash of Civilizations Thesis” (Cambridge: Harvard University Faculty Research Working Papers, 2002).

<sup>9</sup>Mansoor Moaddel, “Religion, Gender, and Politics in Egypt, Jordan, and Iran: Findings of Comparative National Surveys” (under review). See also Mansoor Moaddel, *Religion and the State: The Singularity of the Jordanian Experience*, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 15:4 (2002):527–543.

<sup>10</sup>*Arab Nations’ “Impressions of America” Poll* (Utica, NY: Zogby International, 2002). See also Richard S. Dunham, “It’s Not Americans That Arabs Hate,” *Business Week Online*, April 15, 2002. The Gallop Poll also surveyed attitudes toward the U.S. in nine Muslim countries in December 2001–January 2002, and The Pew Research Center put similar questions to a total of 71 “opinion leaders” from seven Muslim countries.

relevant polls are regularly commissioned in key Muslim countries by the Office of Research of the U.S. Department of State.<sup>11</sup>

I have collaborated on the design and implementation of some of these surveys, and I have been able to acquire for purposes of analysis many of the data sets collected by others. For the most part, my publications based on these data address questions of concern to the discipline of Political Science. In addition, however, these publications, and those of others, provide a picture of the nature and determinants of political attitudes that differs greatly from the stereotypes about Muslim attitudes and the influence of Islam that are all too common in the U.S.

### Findings about the Influence of Islam

My findings demonstrate that Islamic attachments have relatively little explanatory power so far as political attitudes are concerned. There is at best a weak relationship between the degree of religious piety or strength of Islamic attachment on the one hand and, on the other, attitudes either about war and peace<sup>12</sup> or about democracy.<sup>13</sup> In other words, those individuals who are most religious, or for whom the religion is most important, are no less likely than others to favor compromise with Israel, democratic governance, and so forth.

On the other hand, all of these political attitudes are influenced to a much greater degree by economic and political considerations, those pertaining to both a person's own circumstances and his or her assessment of the political economy of the country.<sup>14</sup>

Figures 1 and 2 give a sense of some of these findings. Figure 1 compares the religiosity of Palestinians who support reconciliation with Israel and those who oppose it. It is based on a random sample of 1318 West Bank and Gaza inhabitants carried out in summer 2001. The figure shows that those who support reconciliation are almost three times as numerous as those who oppose it. Equally important, supporters are no less likely than opponents to be religious or even very religious.

Figure 2 shows the relationship between religiosity and attitudes toward democracy among 2756 Egyptians interviewed in 2000 as part of the World Values Survey. The figure shows, first, that most Egyptians favor democratic governance, and second, that there is virtually no difference in the attitudes of more religious and less religious individuals.

Nor even do piety and religious attachment have a very substantial influence on attitudes toward Islamic political movements. Many who express favorable views about the movements or their platforms are not personally religious, and many who are personally devout do not express such views. Interestingly, challenging another popular stereotype, individuals with more positive views about political Islam in most instances are not hostile to gender equality.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup>"Americans' Image of Key Muslim Countries Tumbled After 9/11; Images of the U.S. in Muslim Countries Cover Wide Range." Washington, DC: State Department Office of Research, April 23, 2002.

<sup>12</sup>Mark Tessler and Jodi Nachtwey, Islam and Attitudes Toward International Conflict: Evidence from Survey Research in the Arab World, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 42 (October 1998):619-636.

<sup>13</sup>Mark Tessler, Do Islamic Orientations Influence Attitudes Toward Democracy in the Arab World?: Evidence from the World Values Survey in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria, *International Journal of Comparative Sociology* (Spring 2003); Mark Tessler, Islam and Democracy in the Middle East: The Impact of Religious Orientations on Attitudes Toward Democracy in Four Arab Countries, *Comparative Politics* 34 (April 2002):337-354.

<sup>14</sup>Jodi Nachtwey and Mark Tessler, The Political Economy of Attitudes Toward Peace Among Palestinians and Israelis, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (March 2002):260-285; Audra Grant and Mark Tessler, Palestinian Attitudes Toward Democracy and Its Compatibility with Islam: Evidence from Public Opinion Research in the West Bank and Gaza, *Arab Studies Quarterly* (forthcoming).

<sup>15</sup>Mark Tessler, "The Origins of Popular Support for Islamist Movements: A Political Economy Analysis," in *Islam, Democracy, and the State in North Africa*, edited by John Entelis (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997); Jodi Nachtwey and Mark Tessler, "Explaining Women's Support for Political Islam: Contributions from Feminist Theory," in *Area Studies and Social Science: Strategies for Understanding Middle East Politics*, edited by Mark Tessler, with Jodi Nachtwey and Anne Banda (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

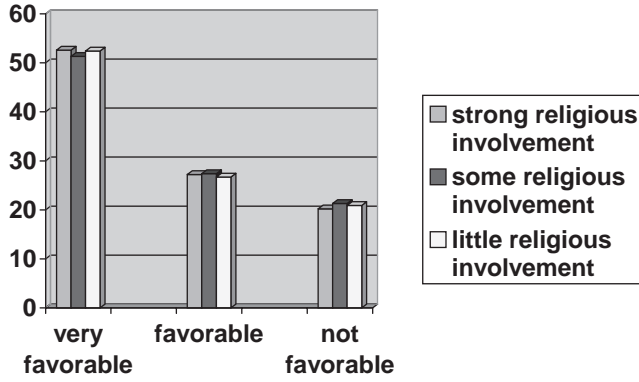


FIGURE 1.

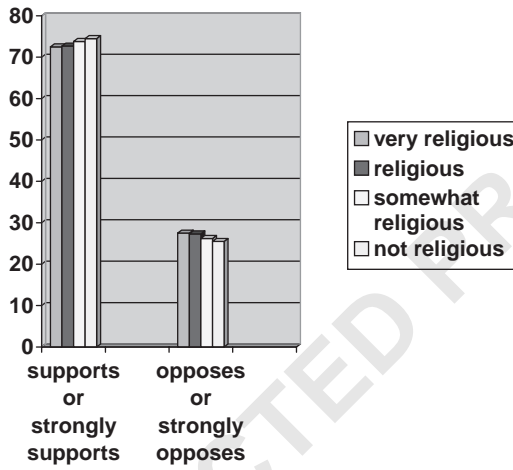


FIGURE 2.

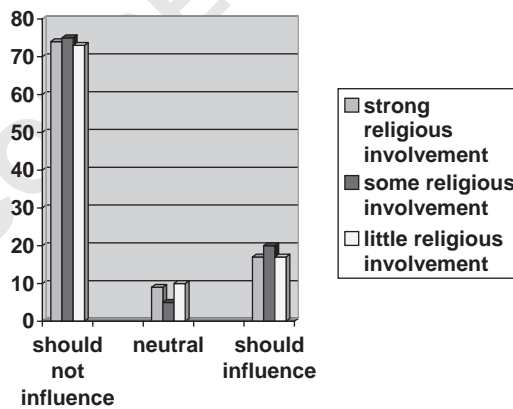


FIGURE 3.

Figure 3 illustrates this pattern with World Values Survey data collected in Jordan in 1999. It shows that most Jordanians believe religious leaders should not seek to influence elections and other political affairs, and, in addition, that views about this issue are almost identical among men and women with different levels of mosque attendance and involvement in religious activities.

Space does not permit a more detailed examination of the relationships illustrated by Figures 1–3. But, with very few exceptions, these patterns hold across different countries and when investigated through multivariate as well as bivariate statistical techniques. A consistent finding thus emerges: religious and cultural predispositions play a much less important role in accounting for variance in attitudes toward politics, governance, and international relations among ordinary men and women than do political and economic factors.

The data used in my own analyses are from large and representative samples drawn from Egypt, Palestine (West Bank and Gaza), Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Algeria, Kuwait, and Turkey. Others have published the results of surveys conducted in other Muslim countries, including Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia.

### Attitudes Toward the U.S.

Some of these surveys also investigate attitudes toward the United States. And the pattern that consistently emerges is a strong dislike for American foreign policy but much more nuanced, and often quite positive, attitudes toward American society and culture and toward the American people. This confirms what Americans visiting the Islamic world often hear in one-on-one conversations, and what I have been told on several occasions in exactly these words: “When you return to the U.S., give my love to the American people and tell your president to go to hell!”

The Zogby polls conducted in the spring of 2002 confirm that this pattern is indeed widespread. It is illustrated by the findings from Egypt shown in Figure 4. The figure shows the degree to which men and women in different age groups have favorable opinions about U.S. education, U.S. freedom and democracy, and U.S. policy toward the Arabs. More specifically, it shows that while almost no respondents have a favorable attitude toward U.S. policy, very substantial majorities have a positive view of our educational system and form of government. It also indicates that these positive attitudes are more common among younger Egyptians.

The Zogby study was carried out in eight Muslim majority countries, and in most instances the distribution of attitudes is similar to that noted for Egypt. Favorable

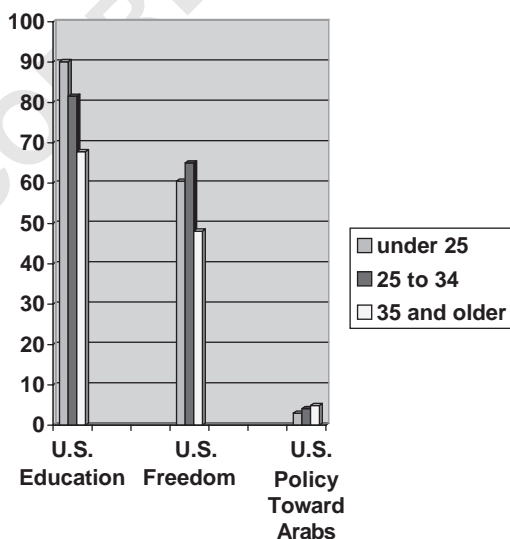


FIGURE 4.

attitudes were expressed by substantial numbers of respondents when asked not only about American education and freedom but also about American science, American movies and television, and the American people in general. By contrast, judgments about virtually all aspects of our Middle East policy were judged very unfavorably. Thus, as readers familiar with the Middle East will immediately recognize, antipathy toward the U.S. and the West does not flow from cultural dissonance; it is based not on who we are perceived to be but on what we are perceived to do.

The Zogby data also provide a basis for assessing some of the factors that play a role in shaping attitudes about the U.S. Moreover, as in the case of Islam, they point to trends that are at variance with some common assumptions. For example, younger Arabs and Muslims do not have more negative views of Western society than do older individuals, and in many cases their views are significantly more positive. Similarly, watching satellite television is frequently correlated with attitudes about Western norms and institutions that are more favorable, not less. My own analysis of survey data collected in North Africa in 1995 and 1996 produced similar findings regarding generational differences<sup>16</sup> and the impact of satellite television.<sup>17</sup>

None of this is intended to substitute positive stereotypes for negative ones. Arab and Muslim attitudes, like our own, are complicated and shaped by changing conditions. Further, some citizens in Arab and Muslim countries embrace stereotypes that are every bit as disturbing as our own. These include fanciful conspiracy theories about responsibility for the attacks of September 11 and a belief that Jews manipulate and control global affairs. It also appears that many in the Middle East believe the attacks of September 11 were justified. A survey of 337 Sunni and Shia Muslims in Beirut, conducted in October and November 2001, found that fully 30 percent approved of the attacks and another 12 percent were unsure.<sup>18</sup> A journalistic inquiry carried out in Kuwait in the summer of 2002 reported that many Kuwaitis admitted to being happy about what happened to the U.S. and that parties had been held in celebration.<sup>19</sup>

Clearly, then, some in the Arab and Muslim world hold stereotypes and prejudices that are just as troubling as those held by some Americans, and these should be denounced without hesitation. But this is not the most important thing Americans need to know about Arab and Muslim political opinion. Large numbers of ordinary men and women have favorable attitudes toward democracy, American society, and even peace with Israel. Moreover, this is the case as often among those with strong religious attachments as among those for whom religion is less important. Accordingly, self-interest, as well as fairness, dictates that we eschew caricatures derived from the clash of civilizations thesis. There is room for debate about whether or not Muslim assessments of U.S. policy in the Middle East are fair and accurate. But it should be clear that religion and culture are not fostering antipathy to Western norms and institutions, and that anti-Americanism is for the most part a response to perceptions and judgments regarding U.S. foreign policy.

<sup>16</sup>Mark Tessler, Morocco's Next Political Generation, *Journal of North African Studies* 5(Spring 2000):1-26.

<sup>17</sup>Mark Tessler, "The Contribution of Public Opinion Research to an Understanding of the Information Revolution and Its Impact in North Africa," in *The Impact of the Information and Communication Revolution on Society and State in the Arab World*, edited by Jamal S. Al-Suwaidi (London: I. B. Tauris, 1998).

<sup>18</sup>Hilal Khashan, Islam and Terrorism: Lebanese Muslim Views on September 11, unpublished paper.

<sup>19</sup>Craig S. Smith, "Saved by U.S., Kuwait Now Shows Mixed Feelings," *New York Times*, October 12, 2002.



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