

# Losing the Popularity Contest

*By Jim Lobe*

Despite renewed U.S. efforts to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement this year, popular views of the United States in the Arab world have actually worsened since 2006, according to a major new survey of public opinion in six Arab states.

Nearly two-thirds, or 64 percent, of more than 4,000 respondents in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) said they held a "very unfavorable" attitude of the United States, up from 57 percent in late 2006, while another 19 percent said their views were "somewhat unfavorable"—roughly comparable to the results of 17 months ago.

Support for Iran and its nuclear program appears to have risen over the same period, according to the new survey, the sixth in a series designed by University of Maryland professor Shibley Telhami and carried out by Zogby International since 2002.

The poll found that two-thirds of the Arab public (67 percent) believes Tehran has the right to pursue its nuclear program and that international pressure to freeze it should cease. That compares to 61 percent who took the same position in 2006.

Remarkably, nearly three out of four Saudi respondents said that if Iran acquired nuclear weapons, it would have a "positive" influence on the region, while 51 percent of UAE respondents agreed. Pluralities in Morocco and Egypt took the same position, while pluralities of roughly one-third in Lebanon and Jordan said Tehran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon would make no difference.

The new survey also found that fears regarding both U.S. and Israeli designs in the Middle East have also increased over the past 17 months, despite the length of time that has passed since the summer 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war that inflamed anti-Israeli and anti-Western opinion throughout the region.

Asked to name two countries that, in their view, posed the "biggest threat" to them, a whopping 95 percent and 88 percent of respondents named Israel and the United States, respectively. In late 2006, the numbers were 85 percent and 72 percent, respectively.

By comparison, the sense of threat posed by Iran appears to have diminished over the same period. While 11 percent of Arab respondents named Iran as one of the two greatest threats in late 2006, only 7 percent did so in the most recent survey.

The survey, which was conducted in all six countries last month, is certain to be

greeted with considerable dismay in Washington, where policymakers had been cheered by some recent polling. One 23-nation survey released by the BBC earlier this month suggested that Washington's image around the globe had bottomed out last year and that the greater emphasis that the George W. Bush administration has placed on diplomacy, rather than war and military threats, during its second term, as well as reduced violence in Iraq, had begun to pay off, at least in public diplomacy terms.

But Telhami's "Annual Arab Public Opinion Poll" is highly regarded among Arabist scholars and public opinion specialists, who note that its consistency of methodology and questions over an unusually long period of time has given it considerable credibility. Telhami, an expert on Arab media, holds the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development at the University of Maryland and serves as a senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, a major think tank in Washington, DC.

The survey found that while views on some issues varied among the six countries, cynicism about U.S. motivations and policies was fairly consistent. Eighty percent said their views of the United States are formed more by U.S. "policies" than by U.S. "values"—up from 70 percent who took that position in 2006.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents (65 percent) said they don't believe that democracy is a real objective in the region, while 20 percent said it is an important objective but Washington is going about it the wrong way.

A 36 percent plurality said they did not believe reports that violence in Iraq has been significantly reduced over the past year, while 31 percent said any reduction of violence that has been achieved has little to do with the "surge" of U.S. forces there and that, in any event, it was only a matter of time before violence increases. Only 6 percent of respondents said they believed the surge was working and would enhance the chances of a stable political settlement.

Asked what they believe would happen if the United States quickly withdrew its forces, 61 percent said Iraqis would find a way to bridge their differences—up from 44 percent in 2006. Only 15 percent said civil war in Iraq would expand rapidly, down from 24 percent in 2006.

Respondents in Lebanon (88 percent), Jordan (87 percent), and Saudi Arabia (66 percent) were particularly optimistic that Iraqis would reach a peaceful settlement if the U.S. withdrew its forces quickly.

Overall, four out of five respondents said they believe that Iraqis are worse off as a result of the U.S. invasion. Only 2 percent said they believed that Iraqis were better off.

The survey found a sharp rise in the percentage of respondents, particularly in Egypt and Saudi Arabia, who identified the Palestinian cause as among their three most important public issues. Eighty-six percent of all respondents named Palestine in that context, up from 77 percent in 2006 and 69 percent in 2005.

At the same time, however, a growing majority was found to be increasingly pessimistic about prospects for a two-state solution based on Israel's 1967 borders. Fifty-five percent overall said they believe the collapse of prospects for such a solution will likely lead to a state of "intense conflict for years to come." Views on the conflict were especially pessimistic in Lebanon and Jordan.

Asked to identify which foreign leader they admired the most, respondents generally volunteered those most outspokenly defiant of Israel and the United States. The most popular was Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, who was named by 26 percent of respondents, up from 14 percent 17 months ago. Second-ranked was Syrian president Bashar al-Assad at 16 percent, up from just two percent in 2006.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came up third with 10 percent of respondents, up from 4 percent in 2006, while al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden was cited by 6 percent of respondents, up from 4 percent.

Al Qaeda also appeared to receive a somewhat more sympathetic response among respondents than in late 2006. Asked what aspect of the group, if any, they sympathize with the most, in 2006 one-third of respondents told interviewers that they "do not sympathize at all with this organization." Only 21 percent took that position in 2008.

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