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What Arabs are saying now?

Five years on from Obama's Cairo University speech, Arab attitudes towards the United States remain war weary and generally wary.

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The polls received wide coverage in traditional and social media, but it was interesting to note the extent to which writers appeared to cherry-pick the findings they liked. Some noted, for example, that Obama's ratings and overall US ratings have improved, while others pointed to the fact that these ratings remain quite low. Some commentaries noted that most Arabs supported US-led negotiations with Iran, while others emphasised results showing most Arabs lacked confidence that these negotiations would succeed. Still others pointed to the surprising finding that most Arabs expressed opposition to US military intervention in Syria and demonstrated mixed attitudes towards US policy in Egypt. And finally, some writers observed the apparent contradiction in the fact that while Arabs overwhelmingly agree that it is important for their countries to have good relations with the US, and identify the Palestinian issue as the most important one facing the Arab world, they also believe that "US interference" is a major source of instability in their region and have no confidence in the ability of the US to be "even-handed" in dealing with the Palestinian question.

As confusing and even contradictory as these individual findings might appear to be, they make sense when taken as a whole and seen in the context of the larger story revealed by the poll. To pick one result, while ignoring this "big picture" is to miss the forest for the trees. Pointing out a

result is as easy as finding a number on a chart. But understanding the meaning of that result is the key to making sense of this or any poll.

The larger reality that defines this poll's setting is, I believe, made up of three factors that shape the current US-Arab relationship.

First and foremost is the fact that we, both the United States and the Arab world, are still living in "the house that George built". After two long, costly, and largely failed wars, the American public is, as President Obama recently noted, war-weary and wary of any new foreign military engagements. Both Iraq and Afghanistan left enormous destruction and uncertainty in their wake. As a result of the Iraq war, for example, Iran was emboldened, sectarian strife was fuelled, extremism spread, and the prestige of the United States was gravely damaged — not only by the war itself, but by the behaviour of the US in the war. Add to that the consequences of the Bush administration's callous neglect of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and you get the shape of the world Barack Obama inherited in 2009.

The second reality is defined by the high expectations created by Obama's election — expectations that were fuelled by the president's Cairo University speech. Even five years later, as the recent ZRS poll makes clear, majorities in almost every country claimed that they had high hopes that the new president would make dramatic changes in US policy. By 2011, however, it had become clear that for many reasons the much hoped for change was not to be forthcoming. Most damaging was how in the face of the rebuff the president received from both Netanyahu and the US Congress, his Israeli-Palestinian peace-making effort collapsed. Our polling after the second anniversary of the Cairo speech showed a steep decline in Arab support for the US and President Obama.

The final reality that defines the setting for this recent poll is, of course, the US response to the uncertainty created by the Arab Spring and the profound distress caused by the bloodletting in Syria. The administration has clearly been confounded by these events and has, at times, meandered, appearing to lack consistency in policy and principles. Arabs were troubled to see the US caught off guard and shifting to-and-fro in reaction to the rapidly changing developments in Egypt. But the final blow for many in the Arab world came with the mixed signals the US has sent in response to the brazen brutality and use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime.

Against this backdrop, it becomes clear why Arab public opinion has conflicted attitudes towards the US and President Obama. Obama is not Bush, and that's a good thing, but that President Obama hasn't been able to deliver on the promises of Cairo remains a source of disappointment.

At the same time, our polls consistently show that Arabs retain positive attitudes towards the American people, culture, values and products and know that America remains the world's major superpower. They therefore want to maintain good relations with the US. At the same time, they have been bewildered by decades of American ignorance, blunders, hubris and its double standards. In a sense, America is not unlike a rich, but bungling, uncle who comes to visit while you are in the midst of making repairs on your home. While you don't want to alienate him, you are constantly afraid of what he'll do next. Arabs know what America can do, but have lost confidence and trust in America's desire and ability to do it right.

What the polls also reveal is that Arabs know what they want from America: solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, rein in Iranian ambitions, and help bring an end to the conflict in Syria. But after the bungling of the Bush administration (which also left Arabs “war weary” and wary of new US military engagements) and the lack of consistency and commitment they see from this administration, the polls show Arabs saying, in effect, “please come and visit, but since we lack confidence that you’ll help fix what’s wrong, please just don’t make a bigger mess.”