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Center for Strategic Studies
University of Jordan
www.css-jordan.org

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فاكس: ٥٣٥٥٥١٥ (٩٦٢ ٦)

Tel.: 962 6 5355666

Fax: 962 6 5355515

css@css-jordan.org

REVISITING THE ARAB STREET RESEARCH FROM WITHIN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Center for Strategic Studies
University of Jordan
Amman - Jordan**

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The heightened sense of conflict and mistrust commonly referred to as the "post-September 11 climate" necessitates investigation and analysis of the relationship between the West and the Arab world. Analysts and scholars in both the Western and Arab worlds are actively engaged in the examination of this changing and complex relationship. "REVISITING THE ARAB STREET: RESEARCH FROM WITHIN" -- undertaken by the Center for Strategic Studies of the University of Jordan -- hopes to add to this body of inquiry by providing an up-to-date analysis of the beliefs and perceptions prevalent in Arab public opinion. Using public opinion surveys conducted in five Arab countries, the study presents a picture of the attitudes found on "The Arab Street".

The study confirms that many Arabs perceive important differences between the cultures and societies of the Arab world and the West. It shows that they hold more complex and nuanced views than much analysis of the region suggests. Most significantly, the study identifies Arab reactions to Western, and most specifically US, foreign policy in the region as being the single most important factor influencing Arab attitudes.

Arabs were asked to express their opinions on a variety of issues, and to specifically address their feelings with regard to the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. Respondents in the countries studied -- Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine -- were found not to perceive "the West" as a unified whole. Rather, they differentiate significantly between countries, particularly with regard to politics. For example, the Arab public views France much more positively than it does the United States and the United Kingdom, largely because there is a more positive perception of French political policies in the Middle East.

Contrary to what some observers, particularly in the US, have suggested, Arabs do not see "the West" in entirely negative terms. Indeed, they highly value many of the attributes of Western states and societies. Significantly, Arab public opinion does not perceive the tension between the Arab world and the West in either religious or cultural terms. Despite views often expressed within and outside of the Arab world, the public does not see an ongoing struggle between "Crusaders and Muslims" nor do they support the notion that there is a "Clash of Civilizations". The evidence consistently emphasizes that the Arab public disagrees with the foreign policies of the US and UK, and that it is these policies which are at the root of anti-American, and subsequently anti-Western, sentiments.

Scope and Objectives

The *Center for Strategic Studies* (CSS) - University of Jordan conducted an empirical survey of Arab public perceptions toward the West. This study aims to clarify and demystify the motives and rationales influencing Arab-West relations, while also providing a baseline for further work. Ultimately, the CSS hopes to contribute to the development of balanced, rational, and less impetuous analysis of relations between the Arab world and the West.

Parameters and Methodology

CSS collaborated with other research centers to conduct this survey in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and the Palestinian Territories (a region known collectively as “the Mashreq”). To one degree or another, all of the countries chosen are directly affected by the Arab-Israeli conflict and thus their political orientations, especially in relationship to the West, are profoundly shaped by that conflict. In addition, all of the nations studied share a colonial history with France and the United Kingdom and all are heavily affected by US policies in the region.

The survey targeted attitudes regarding the US, the UK, and France, as well as attitudes regarding the place of Islam in politics, the definition of terrorism, and the importance of Arab satellite TV in the formation of regional opinions.

National samples in all of these countries were drawn using a multistage, self-weighted design representing all social strata, regions, rural and urban areas, gender, age, occupation, and education distribution in the respective societies. In total, 9,700 people were interviewed: 1200 in each national sample; 500 university students in each country; 120 members of the business community in each country; and, 120 members of the media community in each country. The research questionnaire included 150 questions, covering a wide range of issues.

CONTENTS

SECTION 1: WHERE ARABS STAND explores Arab opinions toward the West.

I. **ATTITUDES TOWARD THE WEST** examines Arab attitudes toward France, the US, and the UK generally and, more particularly, as destinations for work, study, medical care or tourism. Age, education and exposure to the West are analyzed as determining factors in the formation of public attitudes.

II. **ASSESSING ARAB-WEST BILATERAL RELATIONS** considers perceptions regarding bilateral cultural, economic and political relations with three Western countries -- the US, the UK, and France.

SECTION 2: US AND THE OTHER analyzes Arab perceptions of the West as juxtaposed to attitudes about their own culture.

III. **PERCEPTIONS OF THE WEST AND THE ARAB WORLD** explores Arab knowledge of the West and attitudes about societal and individual values deemed as characteristic of the West and the Arab World.

IV. **ISLAM IN THE ARAB WORLD** examines the perceived role for *Shari'a* in

legislation. It also considers the degree to which Arab societies are "open" or "closed" to new interpretation of religion and sheds light on the importance that attitudes toward the role of *Shari'a* in legislation have in the formation of opinions about the West.

SECTION 3: ENGAGING THE WEST - PERCEPTIONS OF WESTERN FOREIGN POLICIES

V. WESTERN FOREIGN POLICY discusses Arab reactions to and perceptions about Western (and particularly US) foreign policy in the Middle East.

VI. CRITICAL CONFLICTS details how Arabs perceive US foreign policies, especially with regard to the Arab-Israeli conflict and the war in Iraq.

VII. RETHINKING TERRORISM examines how the Arab definition of terrorism diverges from the standard concept of terrorism in the West.

SECTION 4: CONCLUSIONS

SECTION 1: WHERE ARABS STAND

Attitudes Toward the West

Arabs hold more nuanced attitudes toward the West than is often supposed. There are critical distinctions within Arab public perceptions of the West, based largely on status, age, and education. While the survey confirms that Arabs are largely disenchanted with the West, distinctions are made between different Western countries. For example, in almost all regards, there is a tendency to view France in a more positive light than either the US or the UK. Arabs also distinguish between attitudes held toward Western countries overall and the positive attributes of Western countries have in certain specific sectors.

Findings indicate that viewing the Arab world as uniformly hostile toward the West, locked into an inevitable cultural clash, will lead policymakers in both East and West to miss important opportunities for improving relations. At the same time, it is important to acknowledge the magnitude of the problem. Most specifically, attitudinal data from youth, university students, and national sample populations suggests that there is a growing sense of dissatisfaction. Within this context, positive attitudes toward the US and the UK will continue to plummet unless major changes in their foreign policies are implemented.

Assessing Arab-West Bilateral Relations

Arabs hold more complex attitudes toward their countries' bilateral relations with France, the US, and the UK than is often supposed. Perceptions of existing relations vary significantly across countries and samples. Overall attitudes also vary relating to the levels of desire and willingness of Arabs to engage with the West for specific reasons such as tourism, education, work, and medical care.

SECTION 2: “US” AND THE “OTHER”

Perceptions of The West and The Arab World

At the same time, Arabs base their assessments of the West on a fairly thin knowledge of its cultures and societies. Indeed, less than half of respondents believe that they have a good understanding of culture and society in France, the US, and the UK. While they note that Western societies profess many positive values, they often feel that actual Western policies do not reflect these values. It is this inconsistency, rather than the values themselves, which engenders Arab disapproval. Yet, despite acknowledged differences, cultural disparities between the West and the Arab world are not seen to be at the core of the current tensions.

Arabs believe that their societal values stand in sharp contrast to the West. They associate Western societies with liberalism, individual liberty, democracy and technological progress, but also with increased levels of societal problems. In contrast, they see their societies as maintaining stronger values of tradition and family, and as being less plagued with social problems. The significant exception to Arabs' positive assessments of the values of their own society is that Arabs believe financial and administrative corruption to be more prevalent in Arab societies than in the West.

There is little evidence that Arabs perceive the West as a Crusader force, intent on destroying the Islamic world in a battle over religious beliefs. Indeed, the Arab world sees the vast majority of Westerners, and those in the US in particular, as not strongly influenced by religious motives. Regarding the role of religion in their own societies, there is significant support among Muslims surveyed for a role for the *Shari'a* in legislation in their countries. However, they do not see Islam, or religious differences with the West, as a significant reason for hostility between East and West. Additionally, most Arabs consider religious fanaticism to be a problem in their societies. Nearly two-thirds of respondents believe religious fanaticism is a problem in both Western and Arab societies.

Islam and the Arab World

In the post-9/11 debate, many have posited that Islamic fundamentalism, understood as firm adherence to religious texts and tenets, is fueling the Arab-West conflict. By examining attitudes toward the *Shari'a* (Islamic legislation/jurisdiction) and *Ijtihad* (interpretation in religion), the study attempts to gauge the strength of support for a role for *Shari'a* in legislation in the Mashreq and consider the extent to which it correlates with levels of friction with the West. Muslim respondents surveyed demonstrate strong support for a flexible interpretation of Islam. Evidence shows considerable support for the *Ijtihad* to remain open. This suggests a high degree of tolerance for various religious

interpretations in the Mashreq and does not necessarily indicate a particular correlation between firm Islamic beliefs and anti-Western attitudes. In short, strong adherence to the precepts of Islam was not found to necessarily equate with hostility or negativity toward the West.

SECTION 3: ENGAGING THE WEST: PERCEPTIONS OF WESTERN FOREIGN POLICIES

Western Foreign Policy

Post-9/11 debate has focused on two major factors for explaining the September 11th attacks. One has invoked the specter of a region out of control and “in crisis,” while another highlights the anger felt by Arabs about US foreign policy in the region as a causative factor. Our findings give credence to the importance of the latter theory. A comparison of attitudes toward French, American and British foreign policies indicates that Arabs consider US foreign policy to be central to the debate and finds that Arab opinions about the US (and by extension, the UK) are related to foreign policies which they find objectionable.

Arabs perceive a striking difference in the foreign policies of France and those of the US and the UK. They characterize France as treating countries with respect and dignity, promoting democracy and human rights, and not imposing its national will upon others. In contrast, the US and the UK are seen to promote their own interests, impose their wills on other countries, and violate human rights. Furthermore, the majority of Arabs believe that US foreign policy is unduly influenced by the "Zionist Lobby" which is widely seen as a driving force behind US foreign policy in the region. This is consistent with the sentiment that US policies in the region are designed specifically to support Israel.

This study also assesses the so-called “Al-Jazeera factor” -- that is, the theory that negative attitudes toward the US and the UK are a product of the coverage aired on Al-Jazeera and other popular Arab satellite channels. There was no clear-cut statistical evidence found to support the contention that high levels of viewership of Arab satellite TV broadcasts bears any relation to negative perceptions of US foreign policy. Discrepancies between the exposure to coverage and sample attitudes suggest that access to Arab satellite stations is not a determiner of attitudes toward Western policies. In fact, blaming the Arab media for fomenting anti-Western feelings may be further obscuring an understanding of the true causes of popular Arab discontent.

Critical Conflicts

The study consistently points to US foreign policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Iraqi war as the most fundamental reason for problems between the US and the Arab World. There is widespread and universal dissatisfaction with the US position vis-à-vis the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Arabs doubt American sincerity in seeking a just solution to that dilemma and instead view the US as seeking only to promote its own interests and those of Israel.

The majority of Arabs also question the justifications for the US-led war in Iraq and do not expect that war to lead either to the establishment of democracy in Iraq or to a better standard of living for Iraqis. Rather, the war in Iraq is seen as an effort to shore up Israeli security and provide an opportunity for pillaging Iraqi resources. It remains to be seen whether the January 2005 elections in Iraq will change or modify these attitudes.

Rethinking Terrorism

Arabs demonstrate a considerably different definition of terrorism than that understood in the West. Arab views of terrorism do not coincide with those defined by the US State Department as "all premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets". Rather, they more often see violent actions -- and the groups that perpetrate them -- through a political filter which determines whether violent acts were undertaken in response to the perceived threats and aggression, most usually seen to be coming from the US and Israel. Thus, Arabs are inclined to define terrorism more according to the motivations of the combatants rather than by the nature of the act. Not surprisingly, there is a correlation between the levels of disaffection with the West and this variant definition of terrorism.

Respondents demonstrated a similar difference in identifying groups using such tactics. Where tactics are viewed as reactions to provocations from the US and/or Israel, more Arabs view the groups identified as terrorist organizations by the West to be legitimate resistance organizations. Attitudes toward the status of Al-Qaeda as a terrorist group remain more controversial, as do perceptions of the "legitimacy" of the 9/11 attacks.

Overview of Findings

The study draws seven conclusions:

- 1) Arabs hold coherent notions of what constitute the values of Western and Arab societies. They associate the West with individual liberty and wealth, while they view themselves as emphasizing religion and family.
- 2) Arab perceptions of Western societal and cultural values do not determine their attitudes toward Western foreign policies.
- 3) Religion is not the basis of tension between Arabs and the West.
- 4) The Arab world does not reject the professed goals of the West's foreign policies toward the Arab World, but rather objects to the discrepancy between professed ideals and perceived reality.
- 5) Arabs disagree fundamentally with US positions on issues such as the definition of terrorism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and war in Iraq.
- 6) Despite disagreements and disillusionments, many Arabs desire stronger relations between their countries and the West.
- 7) Arab dissatisfaction with US policies is unlikely to diminish in the absence of significant US foreign policy changes.

SECTION 4: CONCLUSIONS

In general, the study finds that Arabs perceive important differences between the cultures and societies of the Arab world and the West. Cultural differences are not found to be at the heart of current Arab-West tensions. Rather, the conflict is rooted in deep-seated frustration with Western, and particularly American, foreign policies.

The survey provides little evidence that the tensions between the Arab world and the West, and specifically the US will diminish. Dissatisfaction with US foreign policy is widespread across the Mashreq, regardless of variables of age, educational background and professional status. Youths and those with less education are the most likely to hold negative attitudes. The survey confirms the conventional wisdom that Arabs are largely disenchanted with the West, but it also suggests a number of important refinements. First, Arabs do not feel equally negatively toward all Western countries. Respondents recognize particular strengths of individual Western countries, and are willing, and even anxious, to engage with the West in specific areas.

Policymakers in the United States and the United Kingdom have reason to be concerned about the demographic and political trends in the region. The large, and ever-growing, youth population, the less educated, and those outside of elite circles hold the most hostile feelings toward those countries. Given the current demographic make-up of the Mashreq - with burgeoning young populations and limited upward mobility - relations are unlikely to improve in the absence of significant policy changes. Improving cross-cultural dialogue and undertaking societal and cultural exchanges alone will not alleviate tensions.

The fundamental conclusion of "REVISITING THE ARAB STREET: RESEARCH FROM WITHIN" is that disapproval of Western foreign policy, most particularly as embodied by US policies in the Middle East, is at the heart of the fundamental disagreement between the West and the Arab World. This finding is consistent across the five Arab countries and for all demographic groups.

The full report "REVISITING THE ARAB STREET: RESEARCH FROM WITHIN" will be available on www.css-jordan.org by 17th of February 2005.