Can Obama Restore the US Image in the Middle East?

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Sitting in a focus group, a young Jordanian bewailed America's relationship with his region: "Since 1948, we have tried peace, but everything turned out to be a lie. Looking to the future, we don't see anything except more wars, problems and efforts to control our leadership." While in recent years, views of the United States have been quite negative around the world, they have been particularly virulent in the Middle East. Majorities in some countries have even expressed support for attacks on US troops and for key aspects of al Qaeda's anti-US agenda, including driving the United States out of the region.

Thus, there is particular interest in the question of whether a new Obama administration might elicit a more positive response from publics in this part of the world.

Pre-election polling found tepid enthusiasm for Obama. A July-August 2008 BBC/GlobeScan/PIPA poll of 22 countries around the world found the Middle East region to have the lowest level of enthusiasm for Obama. While results indicated more favored Obama than McCain in each of the four Middle Eastern countries polled, the total percentage expressing support for Obama was very low in the larger countries (26 percent in both Egypt and Turkey) and fell short of a majority in the smaller countries (39 percent in Lebanon and 46 percent in the United Arab Emirates [UAE]).

Asked what effect they thought an Obama presidency would have on US relations with the world, in every case the numbers saying relations would be better were less than half: Egypt, 29 percent; Turkey, 11 percent; Lebanon, 30 percent; the UAE 40 percent. In every case, this was below the worldwide average of 46 percent and far below the robust majorities expressing optimism in Europe and Africa.

A Pew poll conducted in spring 2008 also asked people in five Middle Eastern countries how much confidence they had in Obama to do the right thing in international affairs. Only small minorities expressed some or a lot of confidence in Pakistan (7 percent), Egypt (23 percent), Turkey (7 percent), Jordan (20 percent), and Lebanon (22 percent).

So if "not being Bush" is not enough to turn around US relations with the Middle East, what will it take? A further analysis of polls, as well as focus groups I have conducted in five Middle Eastern countries, suggest that there are numerous questions about US policy in the Middle East that people there will be looking to the Obama administration to answer. The three most central ones are: (1) will the United States continue to have a

dominating military presence in the region? (2) will the United States play an even-handed role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict? (3) will the United States support democratization in the region?

US Military Presence: Perceptions by the Numbers

The US military presence in Iraq is, of course, the most visible aspect of US presence in the region and a highly unpopular one. One might assume that if the United States were to withdraw its combat forces from Iraq on the 16-month timetable that Obama has proposed, this would mitigate tensions. This may be the case, but this alone will not address the most fundamental concern associated with US military presence.

To an extent that some US citizens may find difficult to understand, people in the Middle East perceive US forces as posing a threat to them. In a 2007 Pew poll of eight Middle Eastern nations, majorities ranging from 57 percent in Lebanon to 92 percent in Morocco said they were worried "that the US could become a military threat to our country someday." Even in Turkey - a NATO ally -- 76 percent had such a worry, as did 61 percent in Kuwait, a country the United States has defended.

Polls show very strong support for removing all US military forces from the region. In a 2007 WorldPublicOpinion.org (WPO) poll, conducted in conjunction with the Study of Terrorism and Response to Terrorism (START) Center at the University of Maryland, large majorities supported the goal of getting "the US to remove its bases and its military forces from all Islamic countries" in Morocco (72 percent), Egypt (92 percent), and Pakistan (71 percent).

US bases in the Persian Gulf are similarly quite unpopular. In a 2008 WPO poll, large majorities said it is a "bad idea" for the United States to have naval forces in the Persian Gulf, including Egyptians (80 percent), Jordanians (76 percent), Palestinians (90 percent), and Turks (77 percent). Equally large majorities also believe (apparently correctly) that this is the majority view throughout the region.

The argument that US forces in the region offer stability is not persuasive to Middle Eastern audiences. In a 2007 BBC/GlobeScan/PIPA poll, respondents were asked, "Do you think the US military presence in the Middle East is a stabilizing force or provokes more conflict than it prevents?" Large majorities in all four Middle Eastern countries polled said it provokes more conflict than it prevents, including people in Egypt (85 percent), Turkey (76 percent), Lebanon (77 percent) and even the UAE (66 percent)--a country that hosts such a base and is ostensibly more secure as a result.

US military presence is viewed in the context of several invidious goals widely attributed to the United States. One of these assumed goals is to coercively assure US access to oil. In a WPO poll, robust majorities agreed with the statement "America pretends to be helpful to Muslim countries, but in fact everything it does is really part of a scheme to take advantage of people in the Middle East and steal their oil," a position endorsed by majorities in Egypt (87 percent), Morocco (62 percent), and Pakistan (56 percent).

According to one WPO poll, very large majorities said that they think it is a goal of the United States to "maintain control over the oil resources of the Middle East," including Egyptians (91 percent), Moroccans (82 percent), Pakistanis (68 percent), Jordanians (87 percent), Palestinians (89 percent), and Turks (89 percent).

The United States is also seen as having goals hostile to Islam. Large majorities across six countries said that a goal of US foreign policy is to "weaken and divide the Islamic world," including Egypt (92 percent) the Palestinian Territories (87 percent), Turkey (82 percent), Jordan (80 percent), Morocco (78 percent), and Pakistan (73 percent). The United States is seen as feeling threatened by Islam: large majorities agreed that "It is America's goal to weaken Islam so that it will not grow and challenge the Western way of life" including in Egypt (87 percent), Morocco (69 percent) and Pakistan (62 percent).

US foreign policy is even seen as having a pro-Christian agenda. Large majorities see it as a US foreign policy goal to "to spread Christianity in the Middle East," including in Morocco (67 percent), Pakistan (64 percent). Egypt (74 percent), Jordan (71 percent) the Palestinian Territories (88 percent) and Turkey (79 percent).

In this context, it is not surprising that many people in the Middle East approve of attacks on US troops based in the region. In Egypt, at least eight in ten approve of attacking US troops in the region. A majority of Moroccans also support targeting US forces, whether stationed in the Persian Gulf (52 percent) or fighting in Iraq (68 percent). Pakistanis are divided about attacks on the US military--many do not answer or express mixed feelings. However, respondents in all three countries roundly reject attacks on US civilians, either in the region or in the United States. (WPO 2007).

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Needless to say, people in the Middle East will also be closely watching how the Obama administration deals with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Were the United States to succeed in brokering a peace agreement, this would clearly have a positive effect on views of the United States. In a six-country poll in 2008, the Sadat Chair of the University of Maryland presented a list of six possible actions the United States could take and asked what would improve their views of the United States the most. The one that received the most endorsements (picked by 50 percent) was brokering an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement, with Israel withdrawing to 1967 borders and establishing a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital. Stopping economic and military aid to Israel was the 4th most cited (selected by 28 percent).

But even short of achieving an agreement, people will presumably recognize that the United States is not the only factor in success. There will be much interest in how the United States is dealing with the conflict. Polls have found substantial dissatisfaction. A 2008 WPO poll asked people how well the United States is "doing its part in the effort to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict"; majorities said not very well or not well at all in Egypt (86 percent), Turkey (68 percent), the Palestinian Territories (77 percent), and Azerbaijan (58 percent).

A central theme is that the United States is not even-handed. A May 2007 Pew poll found that majorities believe that US policies are not "fair," but "favor Israel too much," in Egypt (86 percent), Turkey (70 percent), Jordan (91 percent), Kuwait (86 percent), Lebanon (89 percent), Morocco (81 percent), and the Palestinian Territories (90 percent).

Though al-Qaeda is not popular in and of itself, when presented a list of goals proclaimed by al-Qaeda in a 2007 WPO poll, two-thirds or more said that they support the goal of trying "to push the United States to stop favoring Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians." This included Egypt (95 percent), Morocco (75 percent), and Pakistan (65 percent).

Strikingly high numbers doubt that the United States is genuinely seeking to create a Palestinian state. WPO asked in 2007 and 2008 whether "the creation of an independent and economically viable Palestinian state" is a goal of the United States. Majorities said it was not in Egypt (91 percent), Morocco (64 percent), Jordan (63 percent) and Turkey (52 percent). Interestingly the one case where a majority said that it is a US goal is in the Palestinian Territories themselves (59 percent).

Large numbers even believe that it is a goal of the United States to expand Israeli territory. WPO polling found majorities believe it is a US goal to "expand the geographic borders of Israel" among Egyptians (91 percent), Palestinians (91 percent), Jordanians (84 percent), Turks (78 percent), Moroccans (64 percent), and Pakistanis (62 percent).

Democracy

Finally, people in the Middle East will be attending closely to whether the United States is genuinely supportive of democracy in the region. Historically, the United States has been criticized for backing autocratic governments--such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia--as long as they are cooperative with US foreign policy goals.

In President George W. Bush's 2005 State of the Union speech, he framed the US operation in Iraq as a means of promoting democracy and called for a renewed emphasis on democracy in the region. This was fairly well received in many quarters and did make some impact on government policies in the region, especially in Egypt. However, once the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Hamas in the Palestinian Territories did well in elections, the United States quickly backed away from this position.

This only served to compound existing doubts about US claims to support democracy in the region on a principled basis. A summer 2008 WPO poll of five Muslim countries found very small numbers saying they believe that "The US favors democracy in Muslim countries, whether or not the government is cooperative with the US"--including in Egypt (16 percent), Jordan (6 percent), Turkey (7 percent), and the Palestinian Territories (11 percent). Rather, attitudes were mixed between the view that "The US favors democracy in Muslim countries, but only if the government is cooperative with the US" and the view that "The US opposes democracy in Muslim countries."

Similarly, asked by Pew in May 2007 whether the United States "promotes democracy wherever it can" or "promotes democracy mostly where it serves its self-interest," majorities said the latter in Turkey (76 percent), Egypt (69 percent), Kuwait (82 percent), the Palestinian Territories (79 percent), in Pakistan (57 percent), and Jordan (55 percent). Only in Morocco did this view fall below half (46 percent), but was still a large plurality.

A 2006 Sadat Chair poll of six nations found majorities expressing the opinion that "democracy is not a real US objective" in Morocco (84 percent), Jordan (74 percent), Lebanon (61 percent), and Egypt (55 percent). Only in the UAE was this not a majority position.

Asked in an October 2005 Gallup poll, majorities disagreed with the statement that "The United States is serious about...the establishment of democratic systems in this region" in Jordan (66 percent), Egypt (64 percent), Iran (56 percent), Pakistan (54 percent), Turkey (59 percent), and Lebanon (58 percent).

Improving the United States' Image in the Middle East

Concern about the United States's image in the Middle East is not simply a frothy concern about being liked, because the United States's image is crucial to its soft power. When the United States is unpopular in the region, it is more difficult for governments there to cooperate with it and it becomes politically rewarding for leaders to be defiant toward the United States. Equally worrisome, when al-Qaeda's criticisms of the United States resonate with a majority of the people, this creates a more favorable environment for al-Qaeda to raise funds, recruit, and operate.

At the same time, improving the United States's image is not an absolute value. Concerns about its image will not and should not be the preeminent factor driving the Obama administration's policy in the Middle East. Thus, the options proposed here for improving the United States's image should be seen as a menu to consider in light of a variety of factors at play at any given time.

All other things being equal, the United States should look for opportunities to lighten its military footprint in the region. No matter what US leaders say, these forces will continue to be perceived as having a threatening aspect and as an instrument of US dominance.

Simply having a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq will be helpful. Reaffirming the intention to not have permanent bases there is key. Whenever possible, US military and civilian functions should be transferred to multilateral institutions such as the UN.

Ramping up forces in Afghanistan will likely create some negative reactions. Here again, the more that operations can be imbedded in a multilateral context, in this case the UN-sanctioned NATO operation, the less it will be perceived as an instrument of US domination. The fact that the majority of the Afghan people support the presence of US forces there (71 percent in a recent ABC News poll) should also be highlighted, as this provides legitimacy. While the high ratio of military effort to civilian effort in

Afghanistan may be a necessity for security, it is also a cost in terms of Afghans' and others' perceptions. Thus, counterbalancing efforts on the civilian side of the US presence should be contemplated.

US military bases in the region should be reevaluated in the context of their soft-power costs. Alternatives for policing the Gulf with multilateral forces or with over-the-horizon capabilities should be considered.

Current efforts to link US aid programs to the US military should be reconsidered. While they may arguably have a marginal benefit to the military's public relations in the region, doing so also enhances the United States's image as a primarily military, and therefore implicitly coercive, force in the region.

Clearly, the United States is going to sustain its commitment to Israel, as Obama has affirmed. At the same time, the United States can renew its commitment to the peace process. Previous US presidents have at times demonstrated their ability to support Israel and the peace process concurrently. Obama's expression of empathy for the suffering of the Palestinian people, in addition to his commitment to Israel, is a good step toward finding an inclusive equilibrium that can be the basis for a new approach. Letting the peace process languish will surely be read as defaulting to the status quo, which is perceived as favoring Israel.

Finally, the Obama administration will have to take a hard look at the costs and benefits of pursuing policies that are perceived to be resisting democracy in the region. The perception that the United States thinks it has such an over-riding need for access to oil that people in the region need to be denied democracy is and will continue to be a major source of anger toward the United States and a rallying cry for groups portraying the United States as an imperial hegemon.

The fear that the current regimes in the region hold in place a brittle system that is the only one that can reliably ensure the flow of oil needs to be questioned. Changes to the present configuration that may come with democratization would not necessarily be for the worse.

This is not to say that all such reevaluations proposed here will lead inexorably to changes in policy. While they may improve the United States's image in the region, there are risks inherent in lessening US military footprint, seeking a more even-handed posture in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, or being more encouraging of democracy in the region. Clearly, though, there are also risks inherent in continuing current policies.

The start of a new administration offers unique opportunities. It is a moment for a fresh reevaluation of US foreign policy from all angles. It is also a period when people in the Middle East will be more receptive than usual to seeing the United States in a new way. The enmity people in the region currently feel toward the United States has been costly in many respects. It will behoove the new administration to take these facts into account as

it considers the policies that will shape the relationship between the United States and this uniquely troubled part of the world.