



Obama's "new beginning" at an end in the Arab world?

An opinion poll conducted in 6 Arab countries in July 2010 showed

- a precipitous drop in the approval rating of President Obama and his administration, and
- a dramatic rise in approval for Iran acquiring nuclear weapons

compared with a year earlier.

It looks like Obama's ambition "to seek a new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world", as set out in his Cairo speech in May 2009 [\[1\]](#), is at an end in the Arab world.

The poll is conducted annually for the Brookings Institute by Zogby International and Shibley Telhami at the University of Maryland [\[2\]](#). The countries covered – Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates – are among the least radical in the Middle East and, apart from Lebanon, have an almost exclusively Sunni Arab population.

Obama plummets

Respondents with a positive view of President Obama dropped from 45% to 20% between 2009 and 2010, while those with a negative view rose from 23% to 62%. Similarly, whereas in 2009 51% of those polled described themselves as "hopeful" about the Obama administration's Middle East policy, a year later this figure had plummeted to 16%. In line with this, those "discouraged" by US policy rose from a mere 15% to a massive 63%.

According to the poll, Obama's policy on Israel/Palestine is the main reason for his decline in popularity. That is hardly a surprise. In the first few months of his presidency, he raised expectations that he was going to force Israel to accept the creation of a Palestinian state in the territories it has occupied by force since 1967. Those expectations were dashed when, faced with opposition from Prime Minister Netanyahu, he gave up trying to force Israel to halt settlement building in those territories. Understandably, the Arab world has concluded that, if he wasn't prepared to force Israel to cease planting Jewish settlers on the territory where a Palestinian state is supposed to be established, then there is very little chance of his forcing Israel to withdraw from that territory altogether to enable such a state to be established.

In his speech in Cairo on 4 June 2009, Obama declared:

"The United States does not accept the legitimacy of continued Israeli settlements. This construction violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace. It is time for these settlements to stop."

However, by September, in the face of opposition from Netanyahu, he accepted that this construction could continue, despite the fact that it "violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace".

It is difficult to believe that he would be as forgiving of Palestinian action that "violates previous agreements and undermines efforts to achieve peace". Significantly, in the same Cairo speech, he insisted that "to play a role in fulfilling Palestinian aspirations" Hamas had to "recognize past agreements". He has yet to lift that requirement upon Hamas.

Iran rises

The Brookings poll also revealed a significant shift over the past year in Arab attitudes towards Iran and Iran's nuclear activities. A fundamental part of the Middle East strategy followed by the Obama administration (and its predecessor) has been to attempt to build an alliance with Sunni Arab states against Shia (non-Arab) Iran. The US would have us believe that Sunni Arabs view Iran as a great threat to the stability of the region, just like the US says it does.

This poll shows conclusively that popular Arab opinion certainly does not regard Iran as a threat to any great extent. Asked to name the two countries that pose the biggest threat in the world, Israel was a choice of 88% of respondents, followed closely by the US itself with 77%. Iran was a long way behind on 10%.

On Iran's nuclear activities, a majority (57% to 35%) believe that these activities were for military purposes. While those figures haven't changed significantly in the past year, the approval for Iran's activities has increased dramatically. Thus, 77% (up from 53% last year) said that Iran has a right to its nuclear program and only 20% (down from 40%) support the US policy of pressuring Iran to stop its nuclear program.

Furthermore, 57% (up from 29% last year) thought that, if Iran acquired nuclear weapons, the likely outcome for the Middle East region would be "more positive", compared with 21% (down from 46%) who thought the likely outcome would be "more negative".

It seems that popular Arab opinion doesn't regard Iran, even a nuclear-armed Iran, as a threat. Israel wins that race by a mile, closely followed by the US.

Osama outpolls Obama

To add insult to injury, President Obama doesn't figure at all in the list of most admired world leaders chosen in the poll. Osama bin Laden and Saddam Hussein do – they are the choice of 6% and 2% respectively. The list is headed by Recep Erdogan (20% up from 4% in 2009), followed by Hugo Chavez (13% down from 24%), Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (12% up from 6%) and Hassan Nasrallah (9% up from 6%). (Respondents were not allowed to choose a leader from their own country.)

There is little doubt that the sharp rise in Erdogan's popularity is as a result of Turkey becoming a vociferous defender of Palestinian rights and moving away from its former close relationship with Israel. Chavez, who headed the list in 2009, has lost out to the more local hero, Erdogan. This won't bring any comfort in Washington.

Nor will the continuing popularity of its arch enemies in the Middle East, Iranian President Ahmadinejad and Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, both Shia leaders admired by a significant proportion of Sunni Arabs.

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September 2010

References:

- [1] www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Remarks-by-the-President-at-Cairo-University-6-04-09/
- [2] www.brookings.edu/reports/2010/0805_arab_opinion_poll_telhami.aspx

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