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**“Does Arab and Muslim Public Opinion Count?”**

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It is fashionable these days to talk about public diplomacy. The discovery that most people in the Middle East have a low opinion of the United States has generated debate certainly since 9/11, in this country, about what we're doing wrong, how we turn the tide, does it really matter at all what people think of us, and whether we make foreign policy by public opinion. Certainly many people have answered in the negative. What I would like to do today is put this issue in a broader perspective in terms of the issues facing the U.S. today and how public opinion in the Middle East plays into those issues.

During the Cold War, American policy toward the Middle East focused on governments, not on public opinion. The American approach was that these are authoritarian regimes in the Middle East, they wield all the power, they shape public opinion, and all we need to do is present a set of incentives and threats to make them behave in a manner that is conducive to our interests in the Middle East. In the end, the assumption was, they could bring the public opinion along if they needed to, and if they couldn't, they could control their public opinion. There has always been some outreach to the public, even during the Cold War, but it was on a far more limited scale than we've had with regions like the former Soviet Union and even those were intended essentially to help friendly regimes. People say the general public in the Middle East doesn't know that we're doing a sewage project in Egypt. This has become sort of a cliché in the public diplomacy arena. But the reality is during the Cold War years, that aid was not intended to help America's image in the public eye directly, but was supposed to help the regimes find ways to bolster themselves in power as they pursue a policy that is beneficial to the U.S. The public was ignored or at least left to regional governments in general. I would argue that the elites around the Bush Administration, when they came to office before 9/11 roughly accepted this notion.

The debate changed dramatically since 9/11 for a number of reasons. First, there was the sudden discovery that America is not liked in the Middle East. I mean when public opinion polls were done in Arab and Muslim countries after 9/11, most people in America were shocked to find out that in countries with which the U.S. had close relations, like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan public opinion was highly critical of the U.S. In a way, once they started asking “why” they began answering the question by looking at the role of governments and concluding that governments were either unable or unwilling to shape public opinion anymore. It’s problematic to leave public opinion strictly to Middle Eastern governments and it is no longer possible to pursue the same policy that was pursued earlier. While public opinion itself doesn’t translate into militancy, militant groups are going to have an easier time recruiting people if there is a high degree of anger. People correlated the anger with the existence of militancy, particularly oriented toward the U.S. Moreover, there was kind of unusual intellectual opinion that emerged. We saw it on the eve of the Iraq War: a coalition that in essence interpreted the Middle East as an area where democracy doesn’t exist and, therefore, the non-existence of democracy in the Middle East was a major factor in the rise of terrorism and so the advocacy of democracy is a good thing in fighting the war on terror. We’ve seen that in the way the President speaks about the region, in which he ties the security at home to degree of freedom abroad.

Many liberals then rallied behind this assumption. This explains, in some ways, the emergence of a coalition, which was more accepting, on the eve of the Iraq War, even if people rejected the notion that there were weapons of mass destruction. There were people who assumed that the consequences of the war were justifiable if they lead to spreading democracy. In the process we’ve had a host of issues that came up pertaining to what was called public diplomacy, which means America’s attempt to communicate directly with the public in the Middle East and change the attitudes particularly toward the U.S. and American foreign policy. Early on, there was an attempt to deal with it as if it was a public relations campaign by hiring an accomplished woman from the advertising world to head the Office of Public Diplomacy in the State Department. But, first, people forgot to ask how unique is Arab and Muslim opinion toward the U.S.—how different is it from other regions around the world? Second, how much of the public opinion in the Middle East is influenced by our policy, by the values that we hold or, for

that matter, by the media that is broadcasting to them? Third, what is the role of governments in all of this; is it a helpless bystander, or is it playing a major role in shaping this anti-American public opinion? There is an argument that is being made in Washington that Middle Eastern governments, while cooperating with the U.S., are also helping increase anti-Americanism in the Middle East to justify certain policies domestically. Finally, how clear or honest have we been about our own priorities when we say we want to respond to public opinion, or for that matter, we want to increase the spread of democracy in the Middle East? Ultimately, the big questions are: so they don't like America very much, why should we care? Does it matter? Are they still irrelevant?

Look at the Iraq War: you had 90% of the public opposed to war in Iraq in places like Egypt and Jordan, yet their governments were willing and able to support American foreign policy; I have been doing a lot of public opinion surveys in the Middle East. I know that a lot of the debates, unfortunately, have been based on speculation by people who often neither speak the languages nor have visited the region. This is an unfortunate reality of the industry of experts that was spawned after 9/11. There are many good experts that also appear in the public, but in general the debates are not grounded in facts. There have been a lot good public opinion surveys and a lot of focused studies done by groups around this country and in the Middle East. Over the past four years, I have regularly done surveys in major Arab countries that I think represent the trends: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Jordan, the U.A.E and Lebanon. The anti-American feeling is very strong. This has been found in every single survey and it has gone from bad to worse over the past four years. My last survey in 2004 showed that those who have a favorable opinion of the U.S. are in the single digit, including those in countries that are friendly to the U.S. While this is more intense than we find in other regions of the world, we've got to keep a kind of perspective on this issue. Arab and Muslim countries are not unique today in their resentment of American foreign policy. In almost every region of the world, whether it's Western Europe or Africa or Latin America or parts of the world that have few Muslims, you find the most resentful attitudes towards the U.S. perhaps since World War II. The resentment may seem more intense in the Middle East because it seems to be helpful to those who seek to harm the U.S., including Al-Qaeda and its allies. In the Middle East, it becomes more important for the U.S. to pay attention.

People forget that there have been times when the U.S. was more favored in the Middle East than were any of the European countries. After World War I, the image of the U.S. in the Middle East was positive. It was seen as a champion of self-determination and independence. Europeans had the image of being colonizers and imperialists. When Woodrow Wilson sent a commission to the Middle East to find out what the public wanted, they wanted independence first and foremost, but said, if they couldn't have independence, please do not give them European imperialism. Above all don't give them French imperialism. If they had a choice, they would choose the U.S. Today, while public opinion polls show that only those who think favorably of America are in the single digit, those who think positively of France are a majority, even in this relatively tense time on issues of the veil in France. When I asked people in my surveys whom among world leaders they admire most, Jacques Chirac, is number one in three of the six countries, and number two overall. When I asked them whom among world leaders do they dislike most, the President of the United States was second only to the Prime Minister of Israel. The U.S. was seen positively at various stages of the 20th century, but relations began to sour after the 1967 War. This is not a relationship that is a function of an historical clash; it is relationship that has evolved as a consequence of policies and changing interests in the world.

We have found that the collapse of positive opinion of the U.S. has emerged rapidly over a period of four years. There has been a worsening of public opinion but, more important, a worsening of what I call trust. What do I mean by that? The State Department wisely asked historical questions in their public opinion polls in the Middle East. In these polls, they asked the question: Do you have confidence in the U.S.? Now confidence and liking or disliking are not the same because they express different kinds of reasoning. To be sure, if you look at the history of Arab attitudes toward the U.S., you find that they've always been critical of the U.S. at some level. We've seen people single out the Bush Administration, which is obviously disliked in the Middle East, as the most pro-Israel government in the history of the United States, but people forget that Carter, who now in historical perspective is seen as evenhanded, was accused of being pro-Israel. People forget that the Arab public accused the first President Bush of being pro-Israel. Clinton, who now is accepted in retrospect, was accused at the time of being the

most pro-Israel, historically. This is not new in and of itself, but what is new is that you have what I see as a collapse of trust.

In the spring of 2000, on the eve of the Negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians that Clinton brought together at Camp David, a pole was done by the State Department. It asked people in Saudi Arabia whether they had confidence in the U.S. Over 60% of the Saudi public expressed confidence in the United States of America. That's more than those in our own public who have confidence in our government. By the fall, after the collapse of negotiations, another pole reported that the percentage dropped down to about the 40s. By the spring, it dropped to almost the 30s, and kept dropping. After 9/11, it took a big hit. The collapse of confidence is definitely new, and that's what I see as the most significant change in attitudes in the region. Before I address analytically whether we should care about that, let me present an example of how and why this issue presents a dilemma for the United States in its foreign policy.

Let me begin with the advocacy of democracy that the U.S. now rates as among its highest priority. The President, in his inaugural speech, in essence, defined it as the theme of not only his presidency, but for the U.S. to spread freedom and liberty around the world. The issue of freedom and liberty does resonate. There are no people in the world who do not want freedom and liberty and certainly people in the Middle East want freedom and liberty and I think most of them know they don't have full freedom and liberty in the Arab world. Up to that point, there is certainly a coincidence and yet there is a complete gap between what we say and how our words are received in the region. Why? Lack of trust. When we say we're going to bring democracy, people don't believe us. They don't believe that's an objective. If you don't trust the messenger, you don't trust the message. When you're starting with a public that sees the President and U.S. policy in a negative light, it's hard to trust the content of the message.

Let's put it in a more specific context: in relation to the issue of Iraq. It is fashionable today to say that what we're doing is going to inspire public confidence and generate support (particularly in Iraq), that we've had elections in the Palestinian arena and in Afghanistan, and that those may inspire people with notions of democracy. Remember one argument for going into Iraq was that it would bring the end of authoritarianism and violations of human rights, and the emergence of a somewhat democratic Iraq would inspire people.

How does this mesh with the reality in the region? First of all, let me tell you what the region sees. Number one, in my public opinion survey, I asked people what they believe motivated American foreign policy toward Iraq. Then I gave them every conceivable answer that has been presented on the debate: advocacy of democracy, end to human rights violations, end to weapons of mass destruction, bringing peace and stability in the Middle East, imperialism, weakening Muslims. The vast majority in every country does not believe that democracy or the advocacy of democracy is the objective of American foreign policy. When I asked, what are the objectives of American foreign policy, the three most important in their answers were: number one, oil; number two, Israel; and number three, weakening the Muslim world. So, they believe America's intention is very different from what the U.S. is saying. Number two, I asked whether they believed the Middle East is more democratic or less democratic now than it was before the Iraq War? The Majority in every country said that the Middle East now is less democratic than it was before the Iraq War. And number three, when I asked if they believed that Iraqis are better off or worse off today than they were before the war, majorities in every country believed the Iraqis are worse off today. That's their perception. Now, we get back to why do they see it that way? What drives their opinions? Are they living in a world of fantasy? Are they mostly reflecting the attitudes of a brainwashing media in the region that is blinding them to the truth the way it is? Before I get to the media, which is a critical issue that needs to be addressed because there is so much confusion about this issue in our public discourse, I want to tell what realities they see and why it is in fact that some of what they see is relatively accurate, at least in terms of what they see in their region.

People don't have much faith in elections. This is not new in the Middle East. They've had elections and they haven't seen them transform their reality. On the eve of the war, 90% of them said no to the war. They didn't want the Iraq War. They believed it went against their interests. And their governments supported the war, directly or indirectly, because when we went to the Jordanians, we said to them, 'we need your help.' They're dependent on us, the Jordanians. The Egyptians are too to some extent. So are the Saudis. We went to them and we would say, 'we want your support for this war.' The King of Jordan will say, 'but my public is opposed to it. I'm fearful they may be

disruptive, that they may act in a way that would undermine my regime.’ In the end, he goes along. But what’s the price of his going along? He goes along with us against the vast majority of his public, which is absolutely opposed, and he’s insecure because he worries that those people who are opposed are now going to be mobilized by those who are not only his enemies, but America’s enemies, and so what does he do to keep his security in place at home? He unleashes his security services. He tightens controls. He minimizes public discourse. And what do we do, even as we advocate democracy, we know he has to do it because we need his support for that policy. What do we do? Is democracy a priority for us? Does the public see it that way? Or, do they see that it is still not a priority because we always have a national security priority that trumps democracy?

Look at a Muslim country outside the Middle East. Pakistan is an essential player in the war on al-Qaeda. Al-Qaeda arguably is the most important threat to America’s national security still today. Pakistan is a country that is very essential, not only for what happens in Afghanistan, which is important enough, but what happens in Pakistan itself. You have a public opinion that is highly antagonistic to the U.S., and you have majorities of Pakistanis who have sympathetic views with al-Qaeda, majorities of Pakistanis who have unfavorable views of the United States. General Musharraf is indispensable in the war on al-Qaeda. He is a U.S. ally who is willing to take on his public opinion to wage that war. In that kind of case, what is likely to happen in America’s priorities? Do we push him to open up or do we allow him the leeway to carry on with the war on al-Qaeda? I think you can take this from one step to the next in most of the countries with whom we have strategic relations in the Middle East. Iraq is an example. We want democracy in Iraq. But how many people here or in Washington would settle today for just a stable and prosperous Iraq that is pro-American? So, our choices are always clearly between some strategic priorities and some democracy. The public in the Middle East pays the price of that trade-off, and for that reason they don’t believe in the advocacy of democracy as an end, unless they see results, which they don’t.

In Iraq, I think everybody agrees that Saddam Hussein’s regime was a horrible and ruthless regime. He violated human rights. In the end, when people in the Middle East look at Iraq what they see is a terrifying model. Yes, there are elections coming up,

but most of them don't believe that they're legitimate elections. Most of the public is focused on what happens to Iraqis, the disintegration of society is frightening: the absence of safety and security at the basic level. It is a terrifying model of anarchy. I believe that deep down in my heart, but most people fear anarchy even more than they crave liberty. And we see why authoritarian leaders always use that fear. We saw it in Russia, backtracking on democracy because of the fears. It happens in every authoritarian country and today Iraq is a tool in the hands of authoritarian leaders saying, would you rather have what the Iraqis have or would you rather not have the stability that I provide you? The choice is clear to most people in the region.

It has become fashionable to blame the Middle Eastern media for all the perceptions that we see. Al Jazeera, which has become a symbol of the new transnational satellite media, has also become the symbol of that which manipulates public opinion, and therefore, accounts for the public attitudes toward the US. If that were the case, why is it that we have people who are resentful of the U.S. in Latin America and Europe, where Al Jazeera is not a key player? The new media is important in one way and that is that governments in the region no longer can unilaterally shape the opinions of the public because they no longer monopolize information. It can be argued that in many countries in previous decades Arab governments controlled the media and used it to advocate their positions. Today, there has been a revolution. That revolution is that you have a market driven media, a media that can reach all over the Arab world and is trying to reach the broadest viewership and, accordingly, is going to give the public what the public wants to see, not what it wants the public to believe. And, those stations that don't provide what the public wants to see lose market share and those stations that provide what the public wants to see gain market share. Al Jazeera understood this and it went up because it could provide content that the rest of the public wanted more than other channels.

We see this, by the way, in what transpired in a variety of places, particularly on the lead-up to the war. In the case of Al Jazeera, it toned down its coverage a little bit on the Arab/Israeli issue. And in the next survey I did I noticed, at least in Jordan, that Al Jazeera dropped to number two and the one that went up to number one in market share was Al-Manar television, or Hezbollah's channel, which was providing far more coverage of those issues than Al Jazeera. On the lead-up to the war, governments like

those of Egypt and Jordan, once they knew the U.S. was going to go to war, began worrying that the anti-American public was going to come back to haunt them because they knew they were going to support the war and the public was going to be opposed to the U.S. In the fall, they began giving the U.S. more airing of its opinions. Mr. Mubarak started placing the blame on Saddam Hussein. The American story was being told more on the Egyptian controlled media and via official statements. What was the result? No impact at all, because people were getting information from everywhere else. They have choices. People surf or can have dozens of stations they can see. They will get the information. The information revolution doesn't necessarily mean that a particular station can manipulate public opinion, but if there is information out there, it's likely people are going to get it. You can't hide or control information. The consequence is that governments feel more insecure because they can no longer control public opinion and, therefore, in some ways, they are much more responsive to and nervous about public opinion than they were in the past.

We have a hypothesis that says people in the Middle East shape their opinions based on what they see in the media. I have done surveys and statistical analyses of the relationship between people's attitudes on issues and what they watch on television. I have been tracing this to see what people are watching, what are their opinions, and whether I can find a relationship between the two. On matters that people consider to be core issues to them, and foreign policy is one of them, the media doesn't appear to be a factor in shaping opinion. That is, people who watch Al Jazeera are not likely to be more anti-American, for example, than the people who watch CNN. People who have satellite television are not likely to be more anti-American than people who don't. In a sample of 3,500 people we found no meaningful statistical relationship between the two. I took it a step further because I believe that on issues that people consider as core to their identity, they get their opinion either from pre-existing beliefs or through political or religious groups or friends and then look at the media. They accept the media to the extent to which it responds to, not as it shapes, those opinions. In addition, I looked at the views of people who don't watch Al Jazeera much at all: Arab Americans. We did a sample of 500 Arab Americans in three states. I asked: what do you watch for news? Most people answered the same way that most Americans answer: the main networks. CNN was pretty high up there. Fox News was number two among Arab Americans,

which a lot of people find paradoxical. Then came the other networks. Some watch Al Jazeera, but very few look at it as their choice for news. I asked about their opinion on American policy toward Iraq and the same set of questions that I asked those in Arab countries. The answers were roughly the same. They are not shaped by Al Jazeera. They are watching the same news that everyone else watches. Something besides the media is shaping public opinion of U.S. policies.

Public opinion is important at a time when it's easier to organize transnationally because of globalization, both in informational and other means. That means that public opinion that is angry is far easier grounds for recruitment. Organizations that may have hostile intent are, whatever their objectives, unrelated to this public opinion. I always wonder what people think when they say public opinion doesn't matter. If you are polling in Pakistan and you're saying the majority of the people don't like American foreign policy and the majority are sympathetic to al-Qaeda but you rely on the thousands and thousands of members of security forces and military, who are a part of this society, what do you think they think about what they're doing? When you are asking them to carry on a war that they don't agree with, how seriously are they going to take the job beyond obeying orders? How likely are you to have public cooperation in these missions? There is also something else that I have identified in my surveys, what we see as a rise in what one might call Islamic Anti-Imperial Nationalism. This rise is coming at the expense of Arabism in many Arab states. It is clearly a function of the failure of the governments and the perception that the U.S. is out to get Muslims. That obviously defines a relationship down the road in ways that are much more difficult to tackle in foreign policy. We're putting ourselves in a position where we face the tradeoff between getting the support of governments and getting democracy. Under these circumstances, democracy will pay the price, because these governments are going to be likely to repress a public that is antagonistic to the policies that they support and we advocate.

Let me end with a brief note on what motivates public opinion toward the U.S. In my surveys, I asked people whether they believe their attitudes toward the U.S. were driven by policies or by values. That is, they do believe that there is a clash of values between the U.S. and the Muslim and Arab world, or is it a resentment of American foreign policy? The vast majority said that the resentment is based on policies not

values. They single out policy toward the Arab/Israeli issue as the number one issue in their relationship. The Arab/Israeli issue remains what I call the prism of pain. It's not the source of all ills in the Middle East, but the prism through which Arabs, at least increasingly more Muslims, see America. In the same way, 9/11 has become the prism through which many Americans see Arabs and Muslims, regardless of the fact that these prisms can be distorting of the broader reality. I fear that, unless we come down to the more critical policy issues, we're on a trend toward something bigger than disagreements with governments. I think people can tackle differences. Arabs always believe that oil and Israel motivate American foreign policy, but those are strategic political interests they can negotiate. They understand it. It's much more troubling if they come to believe that our policies are intended to confront and weaken Muslims because then there is no space for bargaining. There will always be differences between the U.S. as a superpower and people in the region. But if there is no basis for dialogue and bargaining, we're in trouble.

When I served on the commission on public diplomacy we went to different Muslim countries to interview people and look at the nature of the relationship. One of the most haunting pictures came from Turkey. Turkey is a country that has been pro-Western, largely secular, a member of NATO, hopes to enter the European Union. It is seen as a model in Washington for a moderate Islam and an alternative to the Taliban model. When you look at Turkey and ask people why they oppose the Iraq War, the number one answer was not the Kurdish issue, an important one to them. It was a sense that the U.S. is targeting Islam. You see that in Turkey. If you go to the center of Istanbul, there is a building that housed the American Consulate in Istanbul. That building is abandoned, for security reasons. If you go the Consulate, you have to drive a few miles away on top of a high hill overlooking Istanbul, where you have multi-level security with a haunting feeling that this is perceived as a crusader castle. This is not an image we want or need. We must tackle this issue soon. Thank you very much.

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