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Obama Faces Mounting Arab Disillusionment

By David Elkins

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On the eve of a much-anticipated address by President Barack Obama on U.S. policy in the Middle East, a new survey suggests that disillusionment with both Obama and Washington's approaches to the region are once again on the rise throughout the Muslim world.

The [survey](#) by the Pew Research Center's [Global Attitudes Project](#) (GAP) found that Washington's image, which had largely improved after Obama's inauguration in 2009, is now approaching the very low levels that predominated during the last years of the administration of President George W. Bush.

The poll, which was carried out between March 21 and April 26, covered six predominantly Muslim nations—Egypt, Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, and Turkey—as well as Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. It thus took place before the killing by U.S. Special Forces of al-Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden and the Egypt-mediated reconciliation accord between Palestine's Fatah and Hamas parties.

It found that favorable views of the United States have fallen particularly sharply over the past year in Jordan, Pakistan, and Turkey. In Jordan, the percentage of respondents who said they had a generally favorable view of the U.S. fell from 21 percent last year to 13 percent this year—the lowest level since 2003 after the U.S. invasion of neighboring Iraq.

In Pakistan, the favorable percentage fell from 17 to 11 percent—the lowest percentage since 2002 after the U.S. invasion of neighboring Afghanistan. And in Turkey, it fell from 17 percent to 10 percent—the lowest percentage since 2007.

Only in Indonesia, where Obama spent part of his childhood, did a majority (54 percent) say they held generally favorable opinions of the U.S., although in Lebanon, respondents were roughly equally split, primarily along sectarian lines, with Christians and Sunni Muslims generally more favorable and Shia Muslims more disapproving.

The new survey, which also asked respondents about their attitudes toward the “pro-democracy” movements that have swept through much of the Arab world and toward Islamic fundamentalism and related themes, comes as Obama prepares to deliver a major policy address on U.S. policy toward the Middle East.

He hosted King Abdullah of Jordan Tuesday, and will welcome Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the White House Friday.

“With respect to Israel and the Palestinian conflict ... we both share the view that despite the many changes, or perhaps because of the many changes that are taking place in the region, it’s more vital than ever that both Israelis and Palestinians find a way to get back to the table and begin negotiating a process whereby they can create two states that are living side by side in peace and security,” Obama said at a joint press conference with Abdullah Tuesday.

“Jordan, obviously, with its own peace with Israel, has an enormous stake in this. The United States has an enormous stake in this. We will continue to partner to try to encourage an equitable and just solution to a problem that has been nagging the region for many, many years,” he said.

In recent days, however, administration officials have discouraged speculation that the president will offer a detailed peace plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict—a key source of Muslim, and particularly Arab, disaffection with U.S. policy, according to this and earlier polls taken over the past decade.

After his inauguration, and particularly after his [address in 2009 in Cairo](#), Obama raised expectations that he would make that conflict, as well as a more respectful policy toward the Muslim world, a top foreign policy priority in his administration.

But his failure to persuade Netanyahu to implement a settlement freeze on Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem, dashed the hopes of many in the greater Middle East. And, in March, when Washington cast the lone veto against a U.N. Security Council resolution that demanded that such a freeze be implemented, the disillusionment appeared to deepen.

Indeed, huge majorities of respondents in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Territories said they disapproved of Obama’s handling of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. More than two-thirds of Turkish respondents agreed, as did 57 percent of Indonesians. A plurality of 45 percent of Pakistanis disapproved, and only six percent said they approved.

Disapproval—albeit not quite as overwhelming—was not confined to U.S. policies on Israel and Palestine, however. Majorities ranging from 52 percent (Pakistan) to 87 percent (Jordan) said they disapproved of Obama’s handling of Afghanistan. Majorities as high as 80 percent (Palestinian Territories) disapproved of Obama’s handling of Iran.

Perhaps most disappointing to the administration, however, was the general disapproval of Obama’s handling of the popular movements for political change that have swept the Arab world since January. Majorities or strong pluralities in every country said they disapproved of the way Obama has dealt with unrest, although in Egypt, where Obama, after some hesitation, eventually called for former President Hosni Mubarak’s resignation, respondents were more evenly split than in the other countries.

In addition to disapproval of specific administration policies, however, the survey found that some of the same concerns that drove U.S. standing in the Muslim world toward the cellar during the Bush administration remain pervasive.

Thus, strong majorities in the greater Middle East, ranging from 60 percent in Pakistan to 77 percent in Egypt, said that they do not believe that Washington considers their countries’ interests when it makes policy. Even in Indonesia, a plurality of 49 percent said that was the case.

Asked whether their governments cooperate too much, too little, or the right amount with the U.S., majorities in Jordan, Lebanon, and Pakistan and a plurality in Egypt said opted for “too much.” In Turkey and Indonesia, both of which have asserted greater independence from U.S. foreign policy positions in recent years, opinions were evenly split.

With the exception of Indonesia, majorities ranging from 61 percent (Lebanon) to 80 percent (Jordan) said they opposed U.S.-led efforts to fight terrorism, while substantially higher majorities ranging from 68 percent in Pakistan to 87 percent in Jordan said they believed Washington should withdraw from Afghanistan.

The survey also found a loss of confidence in Obama himself, even in Indonesia over the past year. In Indonesia, 62 percent of respondents expressed confidence in Obama, down from two-thirds last year. In Turkey and the Palestinian Territories, confidence has dropped more sharply. In Turkey, only 12 percent said they retained confidence in Obama, down from 23 percent last year; in the Territories, 14 percent said they had confidence in him, down from 23 percent in 2009.

Only 10 percent of Pakistanis said they had confidence in Obama, while 65 percent said they had little or no confidence at all.