

The Rise & Fall of Iran in Arab and Muslim Eyes -
A New Poll

Jane Harman:

Good afternoon. Welcome to the new, new Wilson Center. I think this is the first time we've used this furniture and I hope you all agree that it's beautiful and our thanks particularly to our Director of Communications, Peter Reid, for making this place a lot snappier. Special welcome to the Ambassador of Bahrain, who is -- where is she -- right there -- and the Ambassador from the Arab League, who's right here, to many friends who are on the Wilson cabinet and other Wilson groups, dear personal friends of mine, and to Jim Zogby's son, Matthew. Where is Matthew? Right there. I said, "So you brought your baby," and he said, "Excuse me? I have babies," but according to this mother of four, our children are always our babies. So, we're pleased to see all of you here.

As many of you know, the Wilson Center joined forces, I think it was early last year, with NPR to create a public event series that we call the National Conversation. The quality of the debates during our last few NATCONs has been truly spectacular. Our audience engaged with leaders like General Keith Alexander on cybersecurity, Graham Allison on the relevant lessons of the Cuban missile crisis on its 50th anniversary, Henry Kissinger on China's once-in-a-decade leadership transition and its implications for the U.S. and so forth. We were privileged to have my good friend, Jim Zogby, here this past September for a very important NATCON on America's role in the second decade post-9/11. NPR's Tom Gjelten, who is sitting there, moderated that public discussion and the one on cybersecurity, and we're pleased that both Jim and Tom are joining us here again today.

A few words about the Wilson Center for new audience members both in this room and tuning in via live webcast. Unlike the Washington Monument or the Lincoln Memorial, the Wilson Center is the living memorial to our first internationalist president. Chartered by Congress in 1968, it is the United States' key non-partisan policy forum, we believe, for tackling global issues. Our goal is to build a global brain trust, a network that generates actionable ideas and prepares the next generation of leaders for the policy challenges ahead. And let me just mention that earlier this morning we hosted several very senior members

of the Egyptian government and they had an on-the-record conversation with many from think tanks in this area and others, who asked some pretty tough questions and also got very candid answers. That's the kind of thing we do at the Wilson Center.

Some of the greatest challenges today, as all of us know, stem from the MENA region and the Wilson Center follows developments on the ground very closely. Led by the fearless Haleh Esfandiari, right there, our Middle East program is extremely highly regarded. Haleh, who is participating in today's panel discussion and was part of the discussion this morning, has personal experience with the current Iranian regime. She was detained, as many of you know, in Iran for eight months, including 105 days in solitary confinement, as she went to visit her mother. Her entire career has been dedicated to promoting understanding and dialogue between the U.S. and Iran. And maybe there's a glimmer of hope. I don't know, the press is up and down on this, but if I weren't an optimist I wouldn't have spent nine terms in the United States Congress. And I was at the -- by the way -- the Munich security conference last month when Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi offered to hold direct talks with Washington on what he called the nuclear file. He emphasized that no Iranian red line was getting in the way of direct negotiations with the United States, though he was contradicted a couple days later by the Supreme Leader. Many now think the offer is again on the table. And, meanwhile, the structure of the P5-plus-1 conversation last week in Kazakhstan seemed to me to be adroit. It allowed room for both sides to save face and maybe that means maybe -- maybe not -- but maybe that means diplomacy will have a chance to succeed and achieve the goal of stopping Iran from developing a nuclear bomb.

At the Wilson Center, we believe it's critical, especially with Iranian elections coming up in June, to understand the perspective of those on the ground. How do they view Iran's intentions and potential impact -- and the potential impact of a nuclear-capable Iran? These are questions posed to Arabs and Muslims across the MENA region in Jim Zogby's new report. And I just want you to know, I have one of the few printed and autographed copies on the planet. I am a very special person. The report is entitled, "Looking at Iran, How 20 Arab and Muslim Nations View Iran and its Policies." That will be the launch pad of today's discussion and Jim will summarize his report.

After he details his findings, Tom Gjelten, who covers global security and economic issues for NPR, will introduce our other very special panelists and moderated discussion. I always tease Tom by calling him the husband of a rock star -- Martha Raddatz -- who apparently interviewed John Carey today in Saudi Arabia? Where?

Male Speaker:
Qatar.

Jane Harman:
Qatar. Okay. Martha, as we know, is the chief global

in Iran. Beginning in 2002, when we did our first Arab poll, we found very favorable numbers toward Iran. In the 10 Arab countries we polled back then, they were in the 50 percent range. 2006, we polled again and we found the numbers had skyrocketed up into the 80 percent range. Since then, there has been a steady drop, and I will show that to you shortly. We found numbers were so interesting that this year we decided to do a rather comprehensive poll, 17 Arab and three non-Arab countries, Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Pakistan, to get a better sense of how the region is seeing Iran; not just Iran's favorable/unfavorable attitude, but the Iranian people, Iranian culture, Iranian civilization, its contributions to Islam, and Iran's nuclear program, and Iran's policies in everything from Bahrain and Lebanon to Iraq and the broader Arab gulf. We covered all of those areas in this poll and the poll was completed in November and the results are here today.

Here's what we find. We find a continuation of the trend that begins -- this sets the backdrop for it -- those were the 2006 numbers in the six countries that we poll rather regularly. The numbers have continued to drop, as you see, in almost every country. The UAE number is slightly different because in 2011, as the asterisks indicate, we polled all Arabs in the UAE, not just Emirates. During the same period of time, just by contrast, the U.S. numbers -- the U.S. numbers are interesting because you see -- despite the fact that it looks, you know, like, out of sync, there actually is a pattern here. The Iraq war begins and you see a drop in several countries in 2003, low levels in 2004, beginning of a new administration, 2005, numbers go up, not significantly in most, but in two they go up rather significantly, that is in Morocco and in Jordan. The numbers drop again in 2006, stay at a low point in 2008 even with the beginnings of the Obama, Hilary Clinton and the fact that there was going to be something new happening, the numbers go up in five of the six countries and then go down again in 2010 and 2011 in five and then in four of the six countries polled. And so this U.S. trajectory follows a certain pattern despite the fact that they're not all overlapping one another.

In 2012 -- let me begin the polling in 2012. Here's the attitude toward Iran. The attitude toward Iran is negative in 14 of the 20 countries. That continues the downward trajectory from 2006. In six of the countries, the numbers

are either a plurality or a majority favorable, and it is largely driven, you will see, by sect in Yemen and Iraq, Lebanon we'll talk about quite separately. Algeria and Libya continue to be outliers and you'll see that in almost all of polling, Libya and Algeria having a very different mindset than the other Arab countries. But the numbers are quite low in the rest. In 2006, when we did the poll, in late 2006, we had the polling done on the heels of the Israeli invasion and fighting in Lebanon, the devastation of the infrastructure of Lebanon. Also, there was, prior to that, bombings in Gaza. There was also the continuing war in Iraq and the revelations that had continued to come out. That was the hottest -- one of the hottest years, 2005/2006. On the heels of all of that, Iran was seen as something quite different. In successive years, Iran is being viewed differently. Let's see how Iran is being viewed differently and over what.

First is Iran's role in Iraq: viewed negatively in every country, only positively in Iraq itself and in Lebanon, and again this is sect-driven. A word about Lebanon. In the polling we've done over the years, we find that Lebanon is deeply divided on several issues. Divided, for example, on Syria; divided on Hezbollah; divided on Hezbollah's arms; divided on the Lebanese -- the tribunal -- the international tribunal over finding who was responsible for the assassination of the late Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. But on Iran, it's almost as if everything freezes. And when you mention Iran, what you get in Lebanon is seeing Iran through the prism of back in 2006, when they felt abandoned by most of the other Arab countries, felt abandoned clearly by the United States and Europe, and Iran was the only country standing with them. And then Iran provided assistance since then and investments since then. So it's almost as if the attitudes towards Iran are dependent upon which prism you see Iran through. We were talking at lunch today about the fact that maybe in Yemen and Libya they're seeing Iran through a 30-year-old prism. In Lebanon, they're seeing it through a six-year-old prism. But in the other Arab countries, they're judging Iran's more recent behavior; for example, the green movement. Only in Libya -- I'm sorry -- in Libya, Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon, and Yemen, do you see something favorable for the government. In almost every other country, it is identifying with the green movement.

Should there be economic sanctions against Iran? Support for economic sanctions has grown. You now have support in most of the countries. When you compare it, again, with 2006, there was no support for sanctions in any country but Turkey and today's there's support in every country but Morocco.

Should there be military action against Iran? Majorities do not support it in any country. The only one where a slight majority does is in Azerbaijan. Turkey is below. It's a plurality, but not a majority, driven, again, by sect. The Sunni numbers in Turkey for military action are high, among Shia it is not. But in every other country you get a decided "no." However, on the "be cautious" side, Iran, in every country the numbers that would be tolerant of a military strike have grown. Since -- there was no support for Jordan in 2006, and it's grown rather significantly by the time you get to 2012.

On the issue of sect, is there a sect issue here? In Saudi Arabia in early 2008, we did this poll. We asked the question, "World leader not from your own country that you most respect?" These were the answers in Saudi Arabia. It was not 21 out of 100. It was 100 and we gave them an open-ended question. Twenty-one percent in the open-ended question said Nasrallah, Bashar al-Assad was 13, and Ahmadinejad was 12, for a combination of a rather significant number of Saudis who are saying that these non-Sunni leaders are the ones they most respect. Again, in Saudi Arabia in that same year, Iran's favorable rating was 85 percent, and there was no division among sect, as there wouldn't be with a number of 85 percent.

But now if you look at it today, when the Iran numbers were in the 70, 80 percent range, across the board there was support in both sides. But now if you look at it, you see on the favorable attitude toward Iran, a decisive margin has opened up between the sects in every country. Several factors can be pointed to. Obviously, there has been a lot of propagandizing on all sides. There have been terrorist attacks by extremists coming from al-Qaeda and others, Iraq in particular, Afghanistan -- I'm sorry, Pakistan, also the Shia community has been targeted. Iran's behavior has contributed to it. The result is that you get this gap opening up that is rather substantial. What mitigates -- or mutes, rather, the gap is this issue of culture. There are only a few countries where, Yemen being one -- is an

interesting one where the Shia community in Yemen are not convinced that their culture is better than the Iranian culture. In Bahrain, Shia in Bahrain are sort of indecisive on whether or not their culture is superior to Iranian culture. But in most other Arab countries, Sunni and Shia alike agree that Arab culture is superior. This is just one issue, but there are several others that we polled on about Iran's cultural role, about Iran's civilizational role, about Iran's contributions to history, et cetera, which indicate a level of an Arab pride that is sort of a defining issue in identity that can't be ignored.

There's just one last issue I wanted to raise, and that is the U.S. numbers. This was maybe another item in the poll that really I found striking. U.S. favorable ratings have not gone up significantly, but they have increased. They're beyond where they were in 2011, where they had sunk down to the Bush level -- the Bush years. There was a lot of disappointment after -- two years after Cairo, so many of the promises made had not been fulfilled. In 2012, we saw an uptick, an uptick to the point where U.S. numbers are back where they were in 2009, when President Obama was first elected. It's almost as if he's getting a second shot at being the president who made the promises to make change. And we found in our follow-ups to the poll, people saying things like that to us -- "maybe in a second term he will." "He's better than" -- "We hope that" -- so part of it is a belief in the U.S. and another one is aspirational. "I sense a hope that the U.S. will change." But in any case, favorable ratings went up slightly. What went up significantly was, "Does the U.S. contribute to peace and stability in the Arab world?" And you get the answer, "Yes." So there is a U.S. role. People are seeing that U.S. role as important and that is one of the more interesting findings, I thought, in this overall poll.

Look at the Turkey numbers -- not. Turkey interesting -- Turkey has a very heavy sense of self, we find in our polling. When we asked, "Should any nation lead the Muslim world or should all nations be equal" -- this is in another poll -- in every nation they say, "No, all nations should be equal." In Turkey, they say "No. One nation should lead." And of those who say one nation should lead, 100 percent say Turkey should lead. So, Turkey is proud of its new role, 17th in GDP in the world, playing this new leadership role in the Middle East. They got rebuffed

going north, they turned south, and are feeling quite comfortable with that.

And I'll end it there. Thank you all very much.

[applause]

Tom Gjelten:

the last couple of years, which is Iran sort of repairing its relations with the Arab and Muslim world. We have the reproshma [spelled phonetically] between Egypt and Iran, which is the first in how many years? 30 years. We've got the president of Pakistan just in Iran last week to negotiate a new pipeline deal. So, there have been these small steps that would appear to suggest that Iran is actually ending its isolation in the Arab and Muslim world, and yet your survey finds that isolation deepening.

James Zogby:

It -- look, I think the conventional wisdom was several years ago, and the polling bore it out, that Arab leaders didn't like Iran but Arab public opinion did. That's true. What is true today is that public opinion has now changed and Arab leaders are now playing to a home base that is very comfortable with their fury, in some instances, and worry, in other instances, about Iranian behavior. So, I think that that's indisputable. And Iran worked really hard to get there. Their -- in each of the different arenas, their behavior in Iraq, their behavior in Syria, their propagandizing in the broader region, has caused this -- a degree of frustration, isolation, anger, whatever. They've lost the notion of being the resistance against the west.

Now, with regard to Arab leaders or Pakistan, whatever, meeting with Iran -- I mean, John Kerry's in Egypt. The U.S. favorable ratings are in the basement in Egypt right now. So, I mean, meeting with a foreign leader or having reproshma -- government-to-government doesn't necessarily convey where the broader public is on an issue. It creates a bit of a tension for leaders when they're out of sync with their publics, and I think Egypt has to worry about that as they -- if they do close ties. But, remember, this effort to close the gap with Iran was initially launched by Iran, inviting Morsi. He had to go and make a very strong statement about Syria when he went to Iran. I mean, he knows where his base is and he's going to be -- he's not going to get too far out front of it. So, I think that I'm pretty comfortable with where these numbers tell us we are.

Tom Gjelten:

Now, your charts -- and you took us through them sort of historically, which was very interesting. In other words, you correlated sort of the changes in opinion with actual events that were happening. You didn't have a lot to say

about the significance of the Arab spring, both in terms of attitudes towards Iran and attitudes toward the United States. Did you see any -- do you -- looking back over the year-to-year changes, what was the impact of sort of the -- what we call the Arab spring developments?

James Zogby:

What the Arab spring does is not so much change attitudes, but give attitudes and Arab voices a new sense of empowerment.

Tom Gjelten:

[affirmative]

James Zogby:

In other words, if I were to -- one thing, a comment about the U.S. role. You saw the favorable ratings and the fact that the U.S. contributes to stability. One of the issues that we got when we did our follow-up focus discussion groups with people, is the lower -- everything that President Obama's been criticized for, the leading from behind, actually is the thing that the Arab world -- Arab public opinion likes the most. The non-belligerent, non-belllicose, working together with allies in Libya, working together with groups in the broader region to try to solve problems, and not dictating terms, has actually played quite well for the United States and has created a different sense. The lower profile --

Tom Gjelten:

To the extent that actually there's even more support for military action against Iran now than there was --

James Zogby:

I'm not sure that that's tied to it, but there is more support, but I would suggest to you that given the opposition, that if the U.S. were to strike Iran, you would see a reversal rather dramatically. It would be playing -- it would be President Obama playing by the old rules.

Tom Gjelten:

[affirmative]

James Zogby:

And there's out -- this is America again. And if anything would reopen the door that Iran has worked hard to close on itself, it would be a military strike on Iran. Iran knows

government of Syria must have played an important role. And finally, I think the point I would like to make is that the Arab spring created such a momentum in the Arab world and it was their own doing, you know? And then comes the Supreme Leader of Iran and says -- this is an example that Iran said, "This is going to be the Islamic revolution repeated." And that --

Hisham Melhem:
Before Syria.

Haleh Esfandiari:
Yeah.

Hisham Melhem:
That was before Syria.

Haleh Esfandiari:
Yeah, and this was before Syria, and that put off a lot of people in the Arab street, too, you know? So I think this is their reaction.

Tom Gjelten:
Sure. Jim, we'll get a chance to get your reaction, too. Let's go through the panel first.

James Zogby:
Okay.

Tom Gjelten:
Hisham, you do have to say something about Lebanon, but more generally what's your --

Hisham Melhem:
Well, that's a country I know a thing or two about, but let me start with a quick caveat. I have a jaundiced view of polling everywhere, particularly in the Arab world, although we've been polling in the Arab world for a number of years. This is not really something that people are used to and there are, you know, cultural and societal and historic reasons why I have doubts about these pollings in general. But -- so that's one point. Iran --

Tom Gjelten:
Pollsters have a jaundiced view of you.

[laughter]

Hisham Melhem:

Iran was never popular in the Arab world as a model since 1979. With the exception of the Shiite community, particularly in Lebanon, Iran was never seen as a model to be emulated. The Iranian revolution as not seen as such at any time. 2006 in Lebanon was an exception and 2006 in the Arab world was an exception. Here you have a non-state actor fighting the most powerful country in the Middle East. Look at Israel, from France in the west to India in the east, the Israeli air force is the most capable and powerful, and yet a non-state actor with a few hundred hardened Spartans, if you will, fought the Israeli state to a standstill for 33 days and made a dent in Israel's so-called strategic deterrents. That's why for a few weeks, probably months, afterwards Hassan Nasrallah was seen as a 10-foot-tall -- even in Sunni Cairo. So that should be seen in that context. That's a moment of enthusiasm, if you will, for Hezbollah and for Iran, not ne

It occurs to me that if these poll results are overstating the support for Lebanon -- for Iran, then Iran is really in trouble.

Hisham Melhem:

I mean, no, no. But my point is that's why I have a jaundiced view of polling. I mean, here you have a respected -- you know, Jim -- I know Jim has been working on this for many years and then you have the Pew. They have been doing these pollings in the region also for a number of years. The discrepancy here, in terms of the numbers, are really staggering. But anyway, I mean, I'm not the pollster. By academic training, I studied philosophy and I know the history of the region. You have to follow anecdotes, you have to follow cultural trends, you have to follow political trends. The numbers in Lebanon on Iran do not -- I mean, in Jim's polling, do not correspond with what I know about Lebanon, do not correspond with what I know about the region in general.

Tom Gjelten:

Hisham, can I give Jim just a really quick --

Hisham Melhem:

Sure. Sure, I'm sorry about that.

James Zogby:

First of all, Hisham, that was a classic Lebanese response.

[laughter]

The poll is not about Lebanon. The poll's about Iran. It's not always about Lebanon.

[laughter]

The Lebanon numbers are out of sync, you're absolutely right. But you know what? If you looked closer at the poll -- the Pew poll, and looked closer at the other numbers, the other Lebanon numbers were right on-target with everything else we've done over the years. Attitude toward America the same, attitude toward Saudi Arabia the same, attitude toward Turkey and Russia the same. Nothing moved but Iran. So the question is why did the Iran numbers move in November of 2012? The Pew poll is April of 2012. What made the difference? That's the question we struggled with. That's why we re-pollled. That's why we

did the focus groups and talked to people, and that's the answer we came up with. They were not seeing Iran at that point through the prism of the United States. They were seeing it still through the prism of Israel. And they were seeing it in a very different way and they came up with different answers.

Now, if you also look at the Pew poll and compare, they have 70-something percent of Pakistanis having a favorable view of Iran. We had 20-something percent. They had different numbers on Egypt than we did. I don't happen to think that 50 percent in some Arab countries support a military strike. Our numbers were very different from that and I would think if you're planning a military attack on Iran and you want to go by the Pew numbers, you pay the price for it. I'm just not convinced that what we found out wasn't true.

So, look, I mean, if we hadn't polled 20-something thousand people -- I know what your view is of it. I remember dealing with Liz Cheney and telling her that Saudi women didn't want rights according to what we saw in our polling, that they actually -- Saudi men were more supportive of women having equal rights than Saudi women. It was an unfortunate fact. It was there. She said, "Well, I met four women -- Saudi women -- yesterday and they said that they disagreed with that," and I said "Yes, and we interviewed a thousand and they had a different view. And your four were included in that thousand." I can't dispute the numbers when they've been done twice, when they were re-done again.

Tom Gjelten:

You're also calling attention to trends, and not just --

James Zogby:

And the trends are disturbing and the trends are real. And the issue is that Lebanon does stand out in these numbers, but the rest of the are on-target, and I think that what we have to do is look at the Lebanon numbers and not throw it out, but say, "What were they telling us? What were they trying to say here? What made a difference?" And what we found as we asked those follow-up questions was that people were saying something about Lebanon's situation in the world, its sense of beleaguerment, its sense of still being threatened, and Iran was playing a different role for

them than it was in the rest of the region. And I think that's something to take into consideration.

Tom Gjelten:

Hisham, I want to get back to you, but first let's let Barbara and Marc have a crack.

Barbara Slavin:

Yeah. Thanks. You know, I think that the support for Iran was an aberration in 2006, but it was also a certain admiration for Iran. I remember living in Egypt in the 1980s and there was a sense that Iran was more democratic than any of the Arab countries. And expressing admiration for Iran was a kind of protest vote. It was like voting for Beppe Grillo in the Italian elections or Ralph Nader. It was a way of sticking your finger in the eye of the pro-western autocrats that were in charge of your own system. So once those governments started to be overthrown, there was no longer a need. And, of course, Iran, as Haleh pointed out, in 2009 cracked down viciously on its own people during a presidential election and still has two presidential candidates under house arrest.

So, whatever sense of admiration started to disappear then -- and I agree with you, Jim, that the nail in the coffin definitely has been Syria. But we also -- for me, the interesting results were also ethnic, they weren't just sectarian and ethnic in the sense of the Turks and the Azeris. I found most fascinating that Azeri, even Azeri Shiites, disliked Iranians as a people by a margin of 71 percent to 26 percent. What does it say that Azerbaijan has such a negative view, that Turkey has such a negative view? And I'm going to quote a Middle East scholar named Shireen Hunter, a very good one, who wrote a book on Iranian foreign policy not long ago. And she calls Iran a strategically lonely nation. And indeed it is. Its closest relationship with a neighboring state has been with Armenia, which you did not poll. I'm not sure why. And Armenia is not exactly a powerhouse. Iran is Persian, it is Shia, it has historically not had good relations with Turks, with Arabs, Shia, and Sunni. So I think your poll just confirms that with these added factors, the nuclear issue, which I found fascinating, that there are even small numbers that would consider supporting military action, and, of course, Syria.

Tom Gjelten:

Marc Lynch?

Marc Lynch:

Great. Thanks. I would echo some of Hisham's concerns about polling. Not about your polling, but about polling in general in the Middle East. I think it's gotten a lot better than it used to be, Hisham. I think that it's far more commonplace now, far more standard, newspapers do it all the time, the reports are -- the findings are reported. So I'm less concerned about that -- about the cultural issues that you're talking about. But I am worried about trying to poll in what are effectively failed states or conflict zones, and Yemen in particular. The findings in Yemen are ones that jumped out at me, not because there's anything particularly -- you know, that I would object to the way Hisham did, but just because Yemen is a mess. And polling there is not going to be easy. And it might be interesting to talk about some of those cases.

I just have a couple of thoughts on how you might interpret the data, taking it at face value, in a slightly different

apparently it wasn't a few years ago. And, of course, this is the point that you just made. I mean, to go to Marc's last point, and I'm curious about your other -- the rest of the panelists' thoughts on this -- perhaps that's the headline here, and not the declining support for Iran in the Arab-Muslim world.

James Zogby:

I think it's both and I don't think you can dismiss the declining support for Iran as a factor. The Sunni/Shia split, though, is certainly a subtext and I write about that in the e-book. I think it's an important one. I think Marc is correct to point it out. It's interesting that in some countries, less so than others, and those are countries doing a little bit better at it. But clearly one of the lessons for governments that come out of this is addressing some of the issues of domestic discontent with minorities, or in the case of some majority Shia communities that feel underrepresented or repressed. It's also an issue about the role of terrorism that has -- you know, what happened in Iraq just recently and what's happening in Pakistan is exacerbating this tension. It's not just Iran that's fueling sectarianism. There are other factors, as well, and all of them have to be addressed. But I wouldn't want to underplay the -- or I wouldn't want to be sitting in Tehran saying what Marc says that they may be saying, which I think, you're right, they may be thinking, "Oh, this is working really well for us." But living in that world that Bashar al-Assad is living in and they're living in and thinking, "Things are going right. Just give us another month and we'll figure this out." It's not going to get better. And it's getting worse.

Tom Gjelten:

Haleh, you said that you think this survey will get attention in Iran. What do you think they're saying in Tehran?

Haleh Esfandiari:

What will I --

Tom Gjelten:

What do you think they're saying in Tehran right now?

Haleh Esfandiari:

I think the survey, as I said, will have a sobering effect on them because their impression -- whether they are --

Tom Gjelten:
But do you think that Marc is correct --

Haleh Esfandiari:
-- whether they are --

Tom Gjelten:
-- in thinking that they're feeling --

Haleh Esfandiari:
-- they live in a cocoon, which I don't believe, is that we have the support of the Arab street. Now, the number of the governments who were against us no longer exist and we have one big thing in common and this is the Islamic tie. And I think this is a big mistake to interpret Iran's policy as playing the sectarian role. I mean, it just so happens that, you know, in the other countries, they are playing it. But the Iranian never talk about the Shiite power. Never, never.

Tom Gjelten:
Are they afraid of it?

Male Speaker:
No, no.

Haleh Esfandiari:
I mean, Homineh [spelled phonetically] himself wrong or rightly as the supreme leader of the Muslim world.

Hisham Melhem:
Ummah. The ummah.

Tom Gjelten:
Ummah.

Haleh Esfandiari:
As the -- yeah.

Hisham Melhem:
Yes.

Haleh Esfandiari:
He doesn't seem himself as a Shiite leader pushing for Shiite hegemony, and if we look at Bahrain, the first couple of weeks of the uprising, the Iranians kept quiet.

Then, they started making, you know, statements and supporting, and so on. So they look at it as an internal issue and they don't want to play with fire.

Tom Gjelten:

Pick up on that very briefly, though, Hisham because we've got to get to the audience.

Hisham Melhem:

One reason I don't believe that the Iranians sitting in Tehran are happy with a results of this poll, because the Iranians always fancy themselves under this regime as the leaders of the Muslim world, as if -- you know, they pretend to be. I mean, you think that Turkey would like to lead and revive the Ottoman Empire, the Iranians have a four- or five-thousand year history, they are proud. I mean, you know, I always say Egypt is probably the only Arab country that has most of the attributes of nationhood. And Iran, as Zbigniew Brzezinski keeps reminding us, is a serious country. Culturally and historically, it has a sense of identity. Even the non-Persians of Iran are Persianized because of the pull and the incredible power and influence of Persian culture.

Morocco is a state and the rest are in the stages of being formed as states, so the Iranians have the intention of being the leaders of the Muslim world. And when they look at the Arab street, they know that the Arab street is not with them. In fact, the Arab street is being now fed by extremists, and in the case -- in a Sunni country like Cairo, like Egypt, there is a negative reaction against Shia Islam, which is totally unjustified, as Marc was saying. We see that the Shia communities in Pakistan are being slaughtered almost on a daily basis, not to mention the Christians there, too. So, you have the sectarian as being fed by both Sunni radicals and Shia radicals. But the Iranians are extremely good at political cunning. They never talk about Shia Islam. Hezbollah -- I mean, Hassan Nasrallah, who is as sectarian as you can be, never uttered the fact that "we represent the Shia." When the support and offshoot of Shia Islam, the [unintelligible] regime in Syria, they don't put it in those terms. They always invoke quote-unquote "resistance." That's the new jargon that they use because this is against the American hegemony, Israeli hegemony, and Syria is part of that axis of, you know, resistance to these kinds of hegemony. So they cannot be happy with what's taking place in the Arab

But I think more broadly than that, though -- I mean, I think we're getting back to this question of the emergence of sectarianism and I think Haleh and Hisham are absolutely right that Iran and Hezbollah don't lay claim to Shia Islam, they're talking about Islam. The Gulf media, on the other hand, never stop talking about sectarianism. The Saudi media, the Gulf media in general, they want to label Iran as Shia in order to isolate them within the Shia communities. And I think that when you're looking for what is the origin or what is driving a lot of the sectarianism, I think you have to put a lot of attention there, as well, that there's a political battle going on in the media and Iran wants to be resistance and Islam and the Gulf would much prefer that Iran be Shia. And so when you read these poll results, you can kind of see both of those things taking --

Barbara Slavin:
[unintelligible]

Marc Lynch:
Yes.

Tom Gjelten:
Well, I'd like to turn it over to the audience now and give you a chance. We've sort of thrown out some very provocative findings here. I'm going to you, sir, first, in the back there. And please wait for a microphone. Again, as Jane said, this program is being webcast, so we want our listeners and viewers all over the world to hear what you have to say, if we can get that microphone working. Maybe one on this side, in the meantime. Or --

[laughter]

Male Speaker:
Nobody --

Tom Gjelten:
-- is there anybody that's near a microphone that's working?

[laughter]

Tom Gjelten:

Does that microphone work? Can you bring it down here in front, please? This gentleman has a question.

Male Speaker:
Just holler, just holler.

Jane Harman:
Well, they need the mic so people can hear.

Tom Gjelten:
Yeah.

John Milewski:
Let's see. Test. Okay, we're working. Hi, John Milewski, host and moderator of "Dialogue at the Wilson Center." And my question -- if Haleh is correct and Iranians --

Hisham Melhem:
She's always correct.

Female Speaker:
Always correct.

John Milewski:
Of course she's always -- I know that, I know that. But -- and Iranians care about their clippings essentially and care about public opinion. Do they care enough to do anything about it and if so what are some of the things they might do to try to improve their standing?

Barbara Slavin:
Get out of Syria.

Tom Gjelten:
You want to go, Haleh?

Haleh Esfandiari:
The Iranians -- first, I mean, we really truly have to wait to see how they would react to this poll. They will start criticizing Jim very heavily saying that, you know, probably the rest of the Arab world would think like Lebanon and Iraq and Yemen and Algeria and he must have been biased when he went to the wrong people. And I think they will downplay the popularity among the Shia. They definitely will not play that up. I mean, they would play up the popularity in Lebanon; they would play up the popularity in Algeria or in Yemen and so -- and then for -- you know, but

Hisham Melhem:
They missed, unfortunately.

[laughter]

Marc Lynch:
Who among us has not had shoes thrown --

Tom Gjelten:
Ma'am.

Female Speaker:
My name is Aman-model Deliamas [spelled phonetically]. I'm a senior scholar at the Wilson Center and my question is about something Jim said and I find very hard to believe that this is the case in the Arab world. You said that the Arabs like leading from behind. I think the Arabs are against military intervention, but this is different from liking America to have leadership in the region. Could you please explain how did you come to this conclusion -- the others also. Could you please comment on whether the Arabs like leading from behind or they like leadership --

James Zogby:
I know that Arab governments are frustrated right now. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about trying to account for why American attitudes have edged upwards. And when we talk to people and ask them follow-up questions, what we gathered from it was that the lower profile, the working cooperatively, not being George Bush, not being sort of the aggressive, bellicose, do-it-my-way-or-the-highway approach was actually working with public opinion. That doesn't mean that Arab governments are reconciled to that behavior, but it does mean that public opinion finds more comfort in that than they do in the dictating-terms approach. So let's distinguish. When you say the Arabs, I don't mean the government so much. I mean that in the public opinion, people are liking the kinder, gentler approach.

Tom Gjelten:
Does that ring true with the rest of you? Marc?

Marc Lynch:
I would say that, as with most people, when Arabs say that they want strong American leadership, what they mean is they want the United States to do what they want and if the

Hisham Melhem:
I agree.

Haleh Esfandiari:
-- because, you know, for decades and decades we lived together -- you know, the Shiites and the Sunnis lived together, but now there is a such a danger that we -- it might be to one civil war after the other because the numbers are quite substantial on both sides and that is the danger for the region.

Tom Gjelten:
In the center, ma'am.

Female Speaker:
[unintelligible]. Your research is very interesting.

Tom Gjelten:
Can you say who you are?

Female Speaker:
Libitz Nu-Sevez [spelled phonetically].

Tom Gjelten:
Okay.

Female Speaker:
Yeah. I liked your research but I have a question about the quality of the audience which participated in this research. For example, the level of education, income, female, male, and what was the technique of your research?

James Zogby:
All the polling done was face-to-face. The demographics we -- the full report is available and I can show you the demographics were fairly consistent with the -- with what we know to be the demographics of the country in terms of male/female, in terms of education level, in terms of region of the country. We have a standard procedure that our field team has used where the countries are broken into quadrants and then quadrants are broken into quadrants again, et cetera, and houses visited or public gathering places visited. And in some instances quotas are set and we want to make sure that we get the right number of men and right number of women, but in almost every other case, we allow the sample, which was very large in many of these countries -- I mean, 1,600 in some of them; 1,500 in others

-- and targeting just citizens, which is something we were very focused on doing so that we didn't end up with a whole lot of ex-pat workers in some of the countries creating a very different sense of the audience. So, you know, you poll, you know, 1,500 Saudis, you're going to get a very good cross sample and I feel very comfortable with the demographics which I can share with you and they're in the back of the e-book, and you'll see that it's a fairly representative -- very representative sample.

Let me just make a point. You mentioned something about Qatar before, which I thought was interesting. We ask not just favorable/unfavorable toward the United States and Iran and whatever, we asked a whole range of countries and the Qatar numbers were good. Even better were the UAE numbers. In almost every country, favorable. What's that mean? Does it mean that Lebanon wants to be UAE or wants to be Qatar? No. What it means is what does Qatar mean -- what does UAE mean in the broader region? And what it means is --

Barbara Slavin:
They want to be rich.

James Zogby:
-- it works.

Barbara Slavin:
Yeah, they want to be rich.

James Zogby:
Right.

[laughter]

James Zogby:
It works. They see communal coexistence. They see wealth. It's sort of like living in the hustings [spelled phonetically] here and looking at New York and saying, "Oh, the big city with the lights and the glamor and whatever." So it's kind of -- I advise you to take a look before you sort of just surface look at one headline or another headline. There's lots of subtext headlines.

Barbara Slavin:
Jim, how many people did you poll?

James Zogby:
20,051.

Barbara Slavin:
And what was the timespan?

James Zogby.
The timespan was an average of about three to four weeks per country beginning in some cases in mid-September but ending in November, but it was a no more than three- to four-week period in -- per country. It was just -- we staggered it because it was 20 countries; it was a lot of work.

Barbara Slavin:
Thanks.

James Zogby:
And the data of the actual dates and the cities covered and the, you know, et cetera, and all the demographics are available in the e-book.

Tom Gjelten:
Ma'am, on the side there. The microphone's right next to you.

Valentine Moghadam:
Thank you. Valentine Moghadam, Director of International Affairs at Northeastern University in Boston. Dr. Zogby, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions regarding what I see possibly as anomalies. So, if we pose the question "what has changed since the Arab spring?" certainly your data shows that attitudes toward Iran -- towards the U.S. -- although this is my first anomaly that -- and perhaps this was a misreading of the graph or the bar chart -- but Libya, only 45 percent of the public responded favorably regarding the U.S.

James Zogby:
[affirmative]

Valentine Moghadam:
So I wonder if we can a little bit about that. The other one is what has changed? Evidently attitudes in the Middle East towards military intervention -- I was, for example, very, very surprised to see that in Palestine, which has been very favorable towards Iran, for example, the public

WWC: NATCON 3/5/2013

James Zogby:

My numbers are different than the pew numbers. They have 50 percent intervention in a lot of places that I don't have and I frankly don't think that the numbers are that high, but they have edged upwards and there's no question that they've edged upwards. And in Palestine I found that also quite interesting. I mean, you had Azerbaijan supporting military intervention, you had the Turk's number also up there, and then you had Palestine. Basically it means Iran rings a negative bell in Palestine, is what it means and --

Barbara Slavin:

Incredible.

James Zogby:

-- maybe for every reason they feel Iran's intervened in their domestic affairs in some ways. And so you got a split. It was like a 50/50 split in Palestine, not at all unusual given some of the internal divisions that exist in the country. They don't hold -- you know, they're not holding any water right now for Iran. And so I think that, yeah, there's a story there, but the story is Palestinians are divided and half of them are not really friendly toward Iran -- bottom line.

Tom Gjelten:

Jane Harman has established a couple of traditions here. One is that we end on time and the other is that we give each panelist a chance to make about a 30-second parting shot takeaway. So, a very quick point, and I'm going to skip you, Jim. You've had more than --

James Zogby:

Right.

Tom Gjelten:

-- enough of your time. So --

[laughter]

Tom Gjelten:

-- start with Haleh. Quick, one final point to make before we break.

Haleh Esfandiari:

This polling is going to be a shock to the Iranian government and we should see how they will react to it. I'm as curious as you are, Jim, but I'm also very concerned about this sectarian divide that is developing in the region.

James Zogby:
[affirmative]

Hisham Melhem:
I agree with the sectarian divide and I think we are likely to see it heightened further in Syria and that could lead to the breakup of the country. I see a potential spillover to Iraq and I see a potential spillover to Lebanon. Lebanon is a very brittle country -- a very brittle political structure -- the same thing in Iraq. So unless the war in Syria is contained, in the next six months to a year we are likely to see more bloodshed in the neighborhood around Syria.

Barbara Slavin:
I think Iran has always been strategically isolated since the time of the Shah and even more so since the end of the Shah's regime because of very feckless diplomacy and actions by the Iranian government. I think 2006 was an anomaly and will not come back again, but I also agree very strongly that we should not feel triumphant, as Marc said, and think that this is some sort of green light to the United States to take aggressive action, because the one thing that would make Iran popular in the region is if the U.S. invades it or attacks it in any way.

Marc Lynch:
And I guess I would just echo everyone else, that the sectarianism really is one of the most worrisome things out there and I think it is worthwhile for us, as the gentleman in the back said, you know, to start thinking seriously, not simply observing this sectarianism but trying to find ways to try and deal with it in a proactive fashion before it leads to the outbreak of civil wars, enduring conflict, and undermining the possibility of democracy. Also, thanks, Jim, for doing these polls over the last decade and giving us something to talk about.

Tom Gjelten:
And thanks to all my panelists and thanks to you for coming today and enlivening our discussion. I just want to remind

