

Can Obama Work His Magic on Arabs?

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Among many major misconceptions pertaining to Arabs and Muslims is the common belief that they are a weak-willed, irrelevant collective, easily influenced and effortlessly manipulated. This mistaken assumption underscores the very ailment that has afflicted United States foreign policy in the Middle East for generations.

As media pundits and commentators began their drum-rolling in anticipation of US President Barack Obama's speech in Egypt on Thursday, very few paid attention to the fact that Arabs and Muslims are not so naive as to be wooed by mere rhetoric, but that they are significant players in their own affairs, capable of resistance and change.

To begin with, it's underhanded and foolish to speak of one Arab and Muslim polity, as if geography, class, language and politics, among many other factors, are irrelevant attributes which are easily overlooked. Why is there an insistence on addressing Arabs and Muslims as one unified body – that is, the so-called “Muslim world” – that behaves according to specific rationale; predisposed to respond to the same stimuli? True, various groups within the Arab and Muslim collective share common history, language and religion, but even the same groups differ in historic interpretations, dialects and religious sects and frames of reference.

Why the reductionism? Is it true that a struggling North African immigrant in a French slum carries the same values, expectations and outlook on life as an wealthy, SUV-driving Arab in the Gulf? Does a poor Egyptian, grappling for recognition within a political body that has room for only the chosen few, relate to the world the same way as does a Malaysian Muslim with a wide range of opportunities, civic, economic and political?

Even within the same country, among the same people, adhering to the same religion, does the world mean the same, and will Obama's words in Egypt represent the unifying lexicon that will meet every Arab or a Muslim man or woman's aspirations? Can one lump together those who collaborated with those who resisted; those who exploited others and those who were exploited; those who had plenty and those who had none?

As the countdown to Obama's visit nears the highly anticipated day, pundits and polls are pouring in. A recent survey conducted by Shilbey Telhami and Zogby International was carried out in six Arab countries, each representing unique collective experiences that cannot be compared. The poll declared that Obama is popular among Arabs, yet Arabs are still skeptical of the US . It was learned that Iraq matters the most, followed by the Arab-Israeli conflict.

There is no denial that Arabs in various countries have major perceptions and expectations in common. But who is to say that there are not more commonalities between the poor of Egypt and Mexico , than the elites of Egypt and Pakistan ? However, such assertion would be

irrelevant for one main reason: Arabs and Muslims have been demonized collectively, targeted collectively and at times, victimized collectively. In other words, it's US foreign policy towards various Arab and Muslim collectives that largely explains the constant lumping of all Arabs and all Muslims into one single category.

Arabs and Muslims seem only relevant as a collective whenever the US is interested in carrying out a rhetorical policy shift, a war, a self-serving "democracy" campaign, and so forth. They are available as a collective to be duly demonized as "terrorist" or readily shunned for subscribing to the "wrong" religion.

David Schenker, writing for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy website was honest enough in explaining the significance of Obama's speech in Cairo . He pointed out that Iran is a major issue that Obama and moderate Arabs have in common. His explanation is straightforward: " Tehran 's progress toward a nuclear weapon and its provision of material and ideological support for moqawama, or resistance, across the region is of grave concern to Washington and its moderate Arab allies."

According to the poll cited above, only a fraction of Arabs surveyed seem concerned by the Iranian nuclear program. This leaves Iran posing one major "threat", its support of resistance.

It's ironic that resistance, which is a universal right for any oppressed individual or collective, is being dealt with as a "grave concern". This explains, in part, the lingering illusion that continues to mar US foreign policy, and also highlight the common strength that Arab and Muslim masses continue to wield, their ability to resist. Amid the democracy programs that have appeared and disappeared in recent years - George W Bush's Middle East democracy project being one - none was an outcome of genuine and collective movements in Arab and Muslim nations. Such genuine movements, although in existence, are unpopular in Washington , for they seem inconsistent with US interests.

This leaves one last aspect of collective self-expression, again, resistance, in all of its manifestations. It's the root causes of Arab and Muslim resistance that are most deserving of analysis and understanding, as opposed to mere dismissal on the grounds that it's a "grave concern".

If Obama continues to approach Arabs and Muslims as one single collective, ready to be manipulated and wooed with bogus promises, fancy rhetoric and impressive body language, then he will surely be disappointed. Highly politicized, skeptical and, frankly, fed-up societies refuse to be reduced to a mere percentage in some opinion poll that can be swayed this way or that, whenever the US administration determines the time and place.

It's that incessant lack of depth that has caused the US so much grief in the Middle East , and will cost it even more if such imprudence persists.

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