

Political Attitude Research in the Arab World: Emerging Opportunities

This essay describes two very different survey projects that investigate the political attitudes, values, and behavior patterns of ordinary men and women in the Arab world. One is the Arab Democracy Barometer, an American-Arab collaborative project being carried out in five countries. The other is a survey in Palestine conducted as part of the fieldwork for a doctoral dissertation. These projects illustrate the emerging opportunities for political attitude research in the Arab world. The essay begins, however, with a brief reflection on the history of political surveys in the Arab world, which is necessary to appreciate the significance of the opportunities now emerging.

Until recently, the study of the attitudes, values, and behavior patterns of ordinary citizens was the “missing dimension” of political science research dealing with the Arab world. Such research was not completely absent, but it was limited to a very small number of American and Arab political scientists (for overviews, see Palmer 1982; Farah 1983; Tessler et al. 1987). It was also limited with respect to the countries where systematic survey research could be conducted, the degree to which repre-

sentative national samples could be drawn, and the extent to which sensitive questions could be asked.

There were complaints about this situation as early as the 1970s. Three decades ago, for example, a

major investigation of scholarship on Arab society called attention to the absence of systematic research on political attitudes and behavior patterns. The author, I. William Zartman, stated that “the critical mass of research [in the field of political behavior] has been done outside the Middle East” and that “data generation and analysis in the region remain to be done” (Zartman 1976, 305; see also Ben Dor 1977). A similar assessment was put forward a few years later by Malcolm Kerr, a leading student of Arab politics. Writing in the introduction to *Political Behavior in the Arab States*, Kerr stated that much more research in which the individual is the unit of analysis is needed “to bring a healthier perspective to our understanding of Arab politics . . . and so that we may see it less as a reflection of formal cultural norms or contemporary world ideological currents and more as [the behavior] of ordinary individuals” (1983, xi).

Political scientist Michael Hudson echoed these concerns in the mid-1990s. In his contri-

bution to a 1995 edited volume, *Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World*, Hudson observed that “compared to other regions, empirical survey work on the Arab world is meager.” Like Kerr, Hudson also noted that the absence of rigorous and systematic survey data encourages a “reductionist” approach to inquiry, one in which grand generalizations are advanced in the mistaken belief that citizen orientations can be explained and predicted from a knowledge of the “essential” attributes of Islamic or Arabic culture (1995, 69).

The absence of valid and reliable survey data not only contributed to ignorance and misinformation about the views of ordinary Arab citizens, sometimes giving rise to myths and stereotypes, it also limited the contribution of the Arab experience to the more theoretical and less descriptive research agenda of Comparative Politics. The initiation during the 1980s and 1990s of democratic transitions in many developing and post-Communist countries brought increased interest in the political views of ordinary men and women. Survey research in many of these countries examined the nature, determinants, and consequences of citizen orientations related to governance and democracy. But while generalizable insights emerged from studies in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia, and Eastern Europe, little was known either about the extent to which patterns observed elsewhere obtain in Arab countries or, equally important, about whether evidence from the Arab world might contribute a refinement of these theoretical insights.

This situation is now changing. In part, this reflects the training that students of Comparative Politics with an interest in the Middle East today receive with increasing frequency. Tension between the analytical perspectives of area studies and disciplinary social science, once significant with respect to the Middle East, is becoming much less pronounced (see Tessler, Nachtwey, and Banda 1999). The importance of giving students solid grounding in both perspectives is not new in principle, but there does seem to be an important change in practice, with doctoral students at major universities seeking, and being required to demonstrate, not only the substantive knowledge and linguistic skills necessary for fieldwork in the Arab world but also competence in relevant bodies of disciplinary theory and in social science research methods, including quantitative methods.

There is an even more significant reason that the situation is changing, however. The most important explanation for the dearth of survey research in the Arab world is not a lack of

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interest on the part of political scientists or an absence of the training necessary to carry out such research. The explanation lies first and foremost in the undemocratic character of most Arab countries, which made survey research impossible, or at least very difficult, and thus discouraged students with an interest in Arab politics from selecting topics that required this kind of research. As explained in 1987 by political scientist Iliya Harik in a chapter contributed to *The Evaluation and Application of Survey Research in the Arab World*, political attitude surveys are possible “only under conditions of political freedom,” and the most important explanation for the paucity of such surveys in the Arab world is that the “political climate for this type of research does not exist” (1987, 66–67). Another prominent Arab social scientist, Saad Eddin Ibrahim, made the same point. Basing his conclusions on surveys carried out in the 1980s under the auspices of the Center for Arab Unity Studies, Ibrahim reported that “the Arab political environment is extremely hostile to scientific field research and deeply suspicious of the motives of serious and objective inquiry” (quoted in Harik 1987, 68).

Harik and Ibrahim offered these observations in the 1980s. But the situation has changed significantly since that time. The Arab world still lags behind other world regions with respect to freedom. But there is progress in some countries, and at present there are perhaps eight or nine in which it is possible to carry out systematic and objective political attitude surveys. Moreover, and equally important, the field is not being left to American or other foreign social scientists. There are a growing number of Arab scholars with the interest, training, and institutional support needed to carry out political attitude research, and these scholars are making important contributions. A good example is *Revisiting the Arab Street: Research from Within*, published in 2005 by the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan. This volume presents findings from political attitude surveys in five Arab countries. Another important example is the work of the Ramallah-based Center for Policy and Survey Research, which has carried out more than 100 polls among Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip since 1993.

Scholars in the Arab world frequently collaborate with their American counterparts, provide guidance to American doctoral students, and participate in training programs in the U.S. and elsewhere. For example, during the last four years the University of Michigan has brought more than 40 social scientists from six different Arab countries to Ann Arbor for intensive summer programs in social science research methods. During the same period, Michigan faculty and graduate students have conducted survey research training workshops in seven Arab countries. More than 100 Arab scholars, analysts, and graduate students have participated in these in-country workshops.

Also worthy of note is the extension to five Arab countries of the World Values Survey (WVS). The WVS, which has recently entered its fifth wave, has been carried out in more than 85 countries, and the data produced by these surveys have been used in hundreds of scholarly articles. Until the fourth wave, however, the WVS had not been carried out in a single Arab country. But during the fourth wave of surveys, from 1999 to 2002, the standard WVS interview schedule was administered in Egypt, Morocco, Jordan, Algeria, and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, several of the WVS directors, in collaboration with Arab and Muslim partners, added questions pertaining to religion and other topics to increase the relevance of the WVS to the Arab (and Muslim) experience (see, for example, Tessler 2003).

All of this adds up to an improving climate for political attitude research in the Arab world. To illustrate this, we discuss two very different kinds of survey projects in somewhat greater detail. One is the Arab Democracy Barometer. Mark Tessler is

the principal investigator for this project and Amaney Jamal is the co-principal investigator. The other is a survey in Palestine carried out by Amaney Jamal as part of the fieldwork for her dissertation at the University of Michigan.

The Arab Barometer Project

The Arab Democracy Barometer is a cross-national and collaborative project involving original survey research in five Arab countries: Morocco, Algeria, Palestine, Jordan, and Kuwait. Developed in consultation with the existing Democracy Barometer projects in Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, and East and Southeast Asia, the Arab Barometer seeks to make both a scholarly and an applied contribution. Local scholars provide much of the leadership for each of the Barometer projects, and each has an institutional base at one or more universities or research centers in the region.

Tessler and Jamal initiated the Arab Barometer project and obtained start-up funding for it from the U.S. State Department’s Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI). But the project is in fact directed by a Steering Committee that also includes one member from each of the five country teams. The Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan is the current regional headquarters for the project. Other Arab universities and research centers are also providing institutional support.

The interview schedule being administered to representative national samples in the five countries investigates the attitudes, values, and behavior patterns related to governance and politics of ordinary citizens. The survey instrument is composed of items drawn from three sources. The first is the “core” instrument being used by all of the regional Democracy Barometers. These questions will not only provide valuable information about the political orientations of ordinary men and women in the Arab world, they will also permit direct comparison with findings from the Barometer surveys in Africa, Latin America, and Asia.

The second is a series of items that deal with issues and topics of particular relevance to Arab publics. Among these are questions about the relationship between religion and politics and about regional and international relations. These items were developed at two meetings attended by team leaders from the five participating Arab countries.

Finally, the interview schedule includes country-specific items developed by each country team to investigate issues of local relevance. Use of these items is limited to the country or countries for which they are relevant.

The objectives of the Arab Barometer, like the other regional Barometers, are practical as well as scholarly. With respect to the latter, the goal is to shed light on the nature, locus, and determinants of citizen orientations relating to governance in general and democracy in particular. Survey research in other world regions indicates that the views of ordinary men and women play an important role in democratic transitions, and especially in the consolidation and survival of these transitions. Available evidence suggests that successful democratization requires a citizenry that values democracy and possesses the elements of a democratic political culture. Relevant normative orientations include political tolerance, respect for diversity, civic engagement, and interpersonal trust, among others.

The Barometer surveys will assess the degree to which such orientations are present, determine how they are distributed both within and across countries, and identify factors that tend to either promote or discourage their emergence. Information about these patterns and relationships in five Arab countries will be added to findings from countries in other world regions, thereby contributing to a cumulative and collective scholarly effort to

understand more fully the relationship between the attitudes held by ordinary citizens and the character of the political systems by which these men and women are governed.

Turning to the more practical objectives, the Arab Barometer, like the other regional Barometers, proceeds on the assumption that collecting and disseminating information about citizen orientations has the potential to make four essential and inter-related contributions to democratization and good governance. First, information about the political attitudes, values, and behavior of ordinary citizens contributes to political liberalization by giving visibility and legitimacy to the expression of popular sentiments. This visibility in turn encourages men and women, and especially those in non-elite population categories, to reflect on the issues affecting their society and thereby become more politically informed and engaged.

Second, survey research serves an important monitoring function. On the one hand, it permits assessment of a country's political culture in general and, in particular, the degree to which there is both public support for democracy and citizen values conducive to democratic governance. Survey research also provides base-line data for comparisons over time or with other countries.

Third, survey research enables political leaders to better understand the needs, aspirations, and expectations of the citizens for whom they are responsible. It also makes it difficult for leaders and policy-makers to ignore or misrepresent the views of the men and women they claim to serve. All of this contributes to responsible and effective governance, making leaders more accountable while at the same time building political trust among ordinary citizens.

Fourth, survey research provides objective information about a broad array of societal concerns, like unemployment, health care, and education. This helps government officials and non-governmental organizations identify problems and set appropriate priorities, ultimately promoting more effective public policy and more democratic governance.

To advance these objectives, the Arab Barometer will do more than conduct the surveys and publish findings in scholarly journals. It will also undertake a series of outreach and dissemination activities designed to direct broader attention to these findings in the participating Arab countries, in the U.S., and perhaps elsewhere as well. Following the lead of other regional Barometer projects, these activities may include press reports and briefings, interviews with officials, workshops and conferences, reports and policy papers, and Internet postings. Examples and models are provided by the Barometer in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Afrobarometer has identified three key target groups for its outreach activities—legislators, civic educators, and journalists, and it “works closely with these target groups by adapting Afrobarometer materials to their needs and by engaging them in workshops to address the application of Afrobarometer results to their work” (see www.afrobarometer.org).

The Arab Barometer illustrates a project that involves close collaboration between American and Arab scholars, as well as coordination with similar projects in other world regions. Collaboration of this sort has important advantages for American political scientists, and presumably for Arab researchers as well. One obvious benefit is the knowledge and also the connections that local scholars bring to a program of research, benefits that are magnified as these scholars gain experience and expertise and when they are affiliated with universities or research centers that can provide administrative support for survey research. This is the case for the country teams involved in the Arab Barometer, all of whom have also worked with one or both of the present authors on earlier political attitude surveys.

The knowledge and insight of local scholars contributes to the identification of concepts and variables that might otherwise

be missed, to the formulation of meaningful explanatory hypotheses, to the development of valid and reliable measures, and to procedures of survey administration that increase both the willingness of respondents to be interviewed and the quality of the responses they give. Practical as well as conceptual and methodological considerations are important as well. The participation of “inside” scholars and institutions may provide valuable assistance in dealing with political or social sensitivities, in establishing the legitimacy and credibility of a research project, and in reducing concern about its motives or objectivity and about how the collected data will be used.

Collaborative projects have benefits for the Arab as well as the American participants. In the case of the Arab Barometer, an important goal is the advancement of political reform in the Arab world. In other words, the societies being studied, not just the researchers themselves, are intended beneficiaries. But the project also portends benefits for the participating Arab scholars and institutions, as does collaborative research more generally. In many and perhaps most instances, collaboration brings new resources, valuable external connections, and opportunities to gain additional experience and expertise, all of which give visibility and credibility to programs of research in the region. Institutions as well as individuals benefit, too, as projects frequently build research capacity, contribute to institutional development, and help create the critical mass needed for effective, comprehensive, and self-sustaining programs of survey research.

Such benefits do not result only from collaboration with American and other foreign scholars, of course. But the contribution of collaborative projects like the Arab Barometer is all the more important in view of the “knowledge deficit” identified by the United Nations Development Programme's Arab Human Development Report (AHDR 2003). This deficit was the focus of the 2003 AHDR, which reported that the Arab world has invested less than any other world region in research and development.

Amaney Jamal's Survey in Palestine

In 1999, I set out for Palestine to conduct research for my dissertation/manuscript project. Because my work examines the role civic associations play in promoting democratic attitudes and behaviors, I needed to obtain numerous sources of data. Primarily, I was interested in gathering 1) a national close-ended survey, 2) open-ended interviews with associational leaders, and 3) a close-ended survey of associational members. While the national survey was conducted by the Jerusalem and Media Communications Center (JMCC), I personally administered the open-ended interviews and, with the help of two research assistants, conducted the close-ended survey of 425 associational members.

When I began my research, I became aware of the difficulties of conducting research in a semi-democratic environment where fear and skepticism prevail. Further, because survey work is relatively new to the Palestinian context, I also learned that one had to take the necessary time and care to administer surveys successfully.

As I began collecting data in 1999, I soon apprehended an ongoing rift between civic associations and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). In its attempt to monitor associational activities more closely, the PNA wanted associations to register through the Ministry of the Interior (the outlet responsible for security measures). Non-governmental associations preferred registering at the Ministry of Justice, a more impartial ministry. Some association leaders were worried about my series of questions. Was I affiliated with the PNA *mukhabarat*? Was I working for the PNA and monitoring associational activities? Using

my academic credentials, Institutional Review Board (IRB) documentation, and contact networks, I was able to quell many of these concerns.

In fact, my numerous contacts on the ground became one of my most useful certifications as an unbiased, objective researcher. In most research settings—but especially in the Arab world—one has to invest in establishing concrete and solid networks to carry out sound work on the ground. These networks lend credibility to the research project. When people are in doubt, they verify one's research and academic goals through such networks. Therefore, successful field research in the Arab world greatly depends on one's ability to generate reliable networks to vouch for the credibility of the project. I spent several weeks building these networks. I carefully selected elites who were well-respected and well-known in Palestine, then began soliciting their endorsement of my project. I visited existing academic research centers, universities, government offices, and key civil society members in order to develop a tight network of leaders who would support my research. I asked their permission to use their names, and sometimes I even asked them to make calls to civic associations on my behalf. Without these networks, I would have been largely unable to access civic associations on the ground.

One of the more difficult aspects of conducting fieldwork in the Arab world—and one that I had not anticipated—is the *personal* administration of close-ended surveys. In order to gauge member attitudes on civic and political engagement, I randomly selected associational members to survey. These surveys were absolutely vital and necessary for the research project. As an impressionable graduate student, I did not understand the cultural and political complexities of conducting such a survey.

First, most Palestinians—especially those in remote villages—had very little experience with surveys. To read a survey quickly and ask people to respond in simple yes or no, agree or disagree fashion is sometimes considered rude. Seldom did people want to offer simple responses without going into more detail. As a researcher, I was extremely interested in listening to their reasoning, but conducting a close-ended survey meant that I could not ask open-ended follow-ups—again a measure of possible disrespect from the viewpoint of the respondents. Surveys that normally should have taken 30 minutes lasted well over an hour.

This meant that I spent an enormous amount of time in the field. Most days, I spent 12–14 hours a day (for three months) conducting these close-ended interviews. My close-ended surveys were all face-to-face. This was necessary for two main reasons. First, whereas in many Western settings one can rely on telephone lists or even email to conduct surveys, this was not the case in Palestine. Second, in 1999, several villages were still without phone lines, and the Internet was only used by a small proportion of the population. Face-to-face interviews were necessary to ensure the participation of respondents. Sometimes, I would have to meet several times with respondents before they agreed to participate. I would often have coffee or tea with them beforehand. I invested a lot of time in casual conversations and in getting to know the potential respondents before we conducted the survey. I discussed my project in detail and explained how their participation was vital to the success of the project. Taking this necessary time to build confidence on the ground resulted in the successful implementation of my survey, but again, the time required was something I had not initially anticipated.

Further, because most of the population had very little experience in responding to surveys, they wanted to think through their responses very carefully. They often asked for follow-up explanations—which took more time. Furthermore, they sometimes would ask me to answer the question first; they wanted to hear my opinion on certain matters. Most respondents, however,

thanked me for their participation in the survey, and a few even felt the survey provided them with the necessary mechanism to vent their complaints. Many felt liberated and important that their opinions mattered. A few respondents, however, were disappointed when I explained that each respondent's observation would “only” be one among hundreds. They felt that their voices were again becoming diluted.

Further, due to overall levels of fear, some people became unnecessarily worried when they were randomly selected to participate. Were they under suspicion? Had they done anything wrong? Was I going to get them into trouble? Again, this meant that I had to take the necessary time to ensure that they were not going to get in trouble, remind them that their participation was voluntary, and ensure that any information they provided would be protected by the strictest levels of confidentiality.

Once I returned to the U.S., the arduous task of data entry awaited. I spent an additional two months entering the data into a spread sheet. This mundane task of data entry was extremely time-consuming and also one that is not really appreciated when evaluating the difficulties graduate students face when they conduct their own original close-ended surveys on the ground.

The experience of surveying associational members was invaluable. My first book, *Democratic Citizens in Non-Democratic Nations* (Forthcoming, Princeton University Press, spring 2007), relies on this rich source of data. I find that the impact associations have on the quality of civic engagement varies according to the relationship between civic associations and the ruling government (Palestinian National Authority). Associations that maintain strong ties to government will shape civic attitudes supportive of existing authoritarian patterns of governance. Although associational life can be important in instilling pertinent qualities deemed necessary for democratic citizenship, it may also promote attitudes *incompatible* with democratic norms and practices.

Continuing Challenges

The climate for empirical political research by both Arab and foreign scholars has improved significantly in recent years. Reflecting this trend, and contributing to it as well, is the emergence of credible and legitimate research institutions that give prominence to the study of public opinion. In addition, the importance of survey research is increasingly recognized by policy-makers in many Arab countries. For example, a number of the capacity-building activities mentioned earlier have involved the participation of analysts in governmental or quasi-governmental positions or, in some cases, have actually been sponsored by government-affiliated institutions. This recognition is also reflected in the important cross-national survey of attitudes toward women's status that was conducted for the 2006 Arab Human Development Report. The report is devoted to the “deficit of women's empowerment” (AHDR 2006)

Important challenges and limitations nonetheless remain. There are still many Arab countries where independent and politically relevant survey research is not permitted, or is at best extremely difficult. Moreover, political restrictions and other impediments remain in at least some of the countries where political attitude surveys can be and are being carried out. Official permission is required in some cases, and it is sometimes necessary to submit survey instruments for review. Thus, while there are indeed emerging opportunities, serious and systematic political attitude research in the Arab world is still at an early stage and the prospects for additional gains will almost certainly be tied to the region's political evolution. Whether Arab states will become more open, democratic, and hospitable to empirical political research is uncertain, at least in the short-term. The situation is continuing to improve in some countries but more

generally, as the 2006 Arab Human Development Report observed, there is little evidence of the kind of “widespread and thorough-going [political] reform” for which the report has con-

sistently called. Appreciation of the important gains made in recent years should thus be tempered by an understanding of the challenges and limitations that remain.

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