**Listen to Arab voices**

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In 2020, I published “Arab Voices: What They Are Saying to Us and Why It Matters.” Based on our polling during the first decade of this new century, “Arab Voices” was an effort to lay out the myths that have shaped Western discourse about the Arab World, understand why those myths have taken hold, and what can be done to dispel them.
In separate chapters, “Arab Voices” presented a number of these myths—e.g., “Arabs are more violent and tend toward extremism,” “Arabs hate the West,” etc.—and then demonstrated through our extensive polling of Arab public opinion how each of them was a misperception of the real Arab World. The book concluded with practical lessons for governments, businesses, educators, and the general public to be able to take corrective measures and work to promote better understanding.
What we found was that Western perceptions of the Arab world were too often shaped by negative stereotypes and anecdotal evidence used to justify prejudicial views. As a result, our understanding of who Arabs are and what values and aspirations they have too often missed the mark.
Policymakers and political analysts, alike, often talk about Arabs and at Arabs, but they rarely consider listening to Arabs in order to fully understand their lives, and their needs and hopes for the future. One consequence of this has been the oversimplification of a complex region, which has led to costly policy disasters. In recognition of these failures and still hampered by attitudes shaped by negative perceptions, some voices in the West now argue for disengagement from the region.
More than a decade later, not only the myths persist but with them, and because of them, the misguided policies and prejudices that too often distort the West’s dealing with this critical region of the world.
For that reason, I was pleased that the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change commissioned my polling firm, Zogby Research Services, to undertake an updated poll of opinion in seven Arab countries. Recognising that the Arab world sits at the pivot point of three continents in which Western nations have invested so much, and that this is still a region of enormous human potential, the Institute indicated its belief that correcting course is the better option than withdrawal. And the path forward, as it proposes, is to replace myths and misconceptions with genuine understanding.
For us, polling opens a window, allowing Arab voices to be heard. I call it “the respectful science” because we record the views of every respondent. When we analyse the results, a portrait emerges that can assist us in dispelling stereotypes and correcting misconceptions. And if we pay attention to what people are telling us, we can better shape our policies to respond, to meet their real needs, not the ones we have assumed they have.
What we learn from our 2022 polling is that across the region strong majorities of Arabs: support equal rights for women in hiring and in the workplace; favour equipping young people with technological skills so they can better compete in the economy of the future; are either moderately religious or secular; believe that when religious movements govern, they make countries weaker, and believe that religion, as it is taught in their countries, needs to be modernised.
A final note to policymakers and political pundits: Check your biases at the door and listen to what Arabs are telling us about what they want. As my mother used to tell me: “If you want others to hear you, you must listen to them first.” Thanks to the Tony Blair Institute, Arab voices are speaking to you. Listen to what they’re saying.
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