

Contemporary Conflicts



[Archived Topics](#) > [Politics and Perceptions: the Middle East After September 11](#)

Egypt After 9/11: Perceptions of the United States

By Samer Shehata

Published on: Mar 26, 2004

On September 12 2001--one day after the attacks on New York and Washington--Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak appeared on Egypt's state television with his cabinet to condemn the attacks on America and all forms of terrorism. Mubarak also conveyed his condolences to President George W. Bush and the American people. Two days later, Mohammed Syyed al-Tantawi, the Sheikh of Al-Azhar, Islam's most important seat of learning, also publicly denounced the attack. Tantawi said, "attacking innocent people is not courageous ... and will be punished on the day of judgment."¹ A few days later, on September 17, high-ranking government officials, including Prime Minister Atef Obeid and a number of other ministers, as well as the President's son Gamal Mubarak, visited the American Embassy in Cairo personally, paying their condolences to the US Ambassador and signing the official book of condolences. Official Cairo unequivocally denounced the attacks on America. The reaction from the Egyptian public, however, was much more complex.

This essay explores Egyptian perceptions of the United States since 9/11 and assesses the impact of the attacks on the United States and the subsequent US "War on Terrorism" on Egypt's domestic political economy. By doing this, I also hope to shed light on the dynamics of Egyptian public opinion and the nature of growing hostility towards Washington in Cairo and elsewhere in the Arab world.

More interesting than the official government response was the reaction of ordinary Egyptians to 9/11 and subsequent developments in the war on terrorism. Many Egyptians were simultaneously shocked, horrified and amazed at the attacks and how they were carried out. Others had mixed emotions, expressing feelings of ambivalence; not condoning the murder of innocent civilians while taking pleasure in the fact that America, the most powerful country in the world, had been attacked. And finally, many Egyptians simply did not believe that Arabs or Muslims had carried out the attacks.²

Egyptian reactions to September 11 were complex and varied. Popular opinion shifted decidedly, however, after October 7 and the beginning of the US war on Afghanistan. This shift was discernable in the Egyptian press and popular media and is exemplified in the content of an extremely popular weekly television news show that aired in December 2001. The show, *Hadith al-Medina* (Talk of the Town) boasts huge audiences and its host, Mufid Fawzi, is a well-known television personality.

The episode of *Talk of the Town* under question was filmed almost entirely in New York shortly after the attacks. Fawzi came to the US with a television crew and filmed a two hour special about 9/11 and the American reaction in late October and early November 2001. The show aired in Egypt in December of 2001.

Much of the program was extremely moving, conveying the spirit in New York City immediately after 9/11. There was extensive footage of Ground Zero and the episode accurately depicted the extent of the damage, the severity of the attack and devastation. Fawzi also filmed many of the makeshift memorials set up in downtown

Manhattan, showing pictures of victims and messages written by loved ones and strangers. Fawzi was clearly sympathetic to the suffering of the residents of New York City and the mood in the nation.

Talk of the Town also featured a number of interviews with Egyptians and Muslims in New York, some of which were impromptu encounters; veiled women Fawzi met on city streets or Egyptian men he happened to chance upon. These short segments focused on people's personal experiences after 9/11 and the backlash and discrimination directed at Arabs and Muslims. Egyptians like other Arabs and Muslims are quite understandably concerned about these issues and many have heard, through news reports and word of mouth, about what some Arabs and Muslims have endured after 9/11, including new government measures for immigrants and visitors and increased hostility in the US media and public life.

What was most interesting about the two hour special, however, was how the show ended. *Talk of the Town* concluded with equally moving footage of Afghanistan, some of which appeared to have been taken after the beginning of the US military campaign. The images focused on poverty, Afghan civilians and the devastation that years of war had brought to the country. The program's message was clear: nothing justifies the US bombing campaign and the killing of innocent Afghani civilians. From the perspective of Cairo and other Arab capitals, after all, it appeared as if the most powerful country in the world was bombing one of the poorest nations on earth. And the Gallup Poll of nearly 10,000 respondents in nine predominantly Muslim countries that was released in February 2002 confirmed this. 77% of respondents said the US military campaign in Afghanistan was unjustified.³

The Egyptian print media has been more aggressive in its criticism of the United States since 9/11. In the October 21 issue of *Oktober*, for example, a widely circulating news magazine, a number of articles highly critical of President Bush and America's Middle East policy appeared. Articles with titles like "An Answer to George Bush's question: 'Do the Arabs hate America or do they hate America's policies?'" and another entitled "Who is the Victim? Between America's Missiles and Sharon's Tanks." In fact, explicit comparison was increasingly made in both political cartoons and words between Ariel Sharon's policies toward the Palestinians and United States policy in Afghanistan.⁴

The opposition print media has been the most critical of the United States. A good example of this is a front-page op-ed written by Magdi Mehanna that appeared in the leading opposition paper on January 14, 2002.⁵ The paper--*Al-Wafd*--is the daily organ of the right of center party with the same name. Entitled "America ... and Egypt," the piece concerned a proposed money laundering law that was under discussion in the Egyptian parliament. Washington was pushing Cairo to approve the law for the tracking of money in line with its "War on Terrorism." The very first sentence of the article read, "What does America want of Egypt?" and went on to proclaim that "for every decision and every law and every policy, Washington always has an opinion and a position." "Why does America put its nose in every little or big thing?" Mehanna asked. The author went on to argue that the United States deals with Egypt like a school child, where the United States is the teacher, both preparing the exam and grading it accordingly. The parliament eventually passed a money laundering law in May of 2002.⁶

Hostility toward United States policy reached new heights in late March and April 2002 with Israel's reoccupation of the West Bank and the siege of Ramallah, Jenin, and other Palestinian cities. Massive protests took place in Egypt in response to Israeli incursions and Washington's seeming unwillingness to restrain Israel--protests the likes of which Egypt has not seen for over a decade. Widespread demonstrations against both Israel and the United States with up to 80,000 people demonstrating on a particular day took place throughout much of April. Almost daily protests occurred at Cairo, Helwan, Tanta, Sohag and Minya Universities.⁷

On April 1 at Cairo University, for example, 10,000 people--mostly students--protested the continued Israeli violence toward Palestinian civilians. Traditionally, Egyptian university campuses have been sanctuaries for student protest where government security forces did not intervene. On this day, however, the protesters "broke the police cordon" and left the university grounds, marching toward the nearby Israeli embassy.⁸ Not prepared for this development and caught between several different protests, including demonstrations by primary and secondary school students, security forces used tear gas against the demonstrators before they reached the Israeli embassy. Rocks were thrown by both the demonstrators and police forces and eventually, after several hours of violence and tension, the demonstrators were forced back onto the university campus.

Protests also occurred at the American University in Cairo (AUC), an elite educational institution established by Americans in 1919. Today AUC is viewed by most Egyptians as an institution for the children of Egypt's elite. Tuition is in dollars and instruction is in English. But indignation at Israel and US foreign policy also dominated university life throughout much of the spring 2002 term. Protests, silent marches and donation drives occurred throughout the month of April. A silent protest by AUC female students took place in front of the American Embassy in Cairo where students "stood in silence for two hours holding flowers and posters mourning the death of Palestinians."⁹ And in just four days in April, AUC students, faculty and staff filled 30 trucks with donations of food and clothing for Palestinians in Gaza, in addition to raising approximately 80,000 LE (Egyptian pounds, approximately \$17,000).

There were also regular demonstrations after the Friday prayers at the Al Azhar Mosque and in the delta towns of Kafr El-Sheikh and Tanta and in Upper Egypt. American fast food chains, including Kentucky Fried Chicken and McDonald's, were also attacked. Some of the protests also witnessed anti-regime slogans and chants. Demonstrators voiced their criticism of the Mubarak regime, its alliance with the United States, Egypt's weak policy vis-à-vis Israel and the lack of political freedoms in the country.¹⁰

Unfortunately, at least one protest turned deadly. On April 9 in Alexandria, Mohammed El-Saqqa, a twenty-year-old college student, was killed by shotgun shells fired by riot police. At least 250 other demonstrators were injured when 8000 students, along with others, demonstrated at Alexandria University. Secretary of State Colin Powell was in Egypt at the time and the demonstrators tried to march toward the American Cultural Center in Alexandria to deliver a message of protest to the highest ranking US official in the city. As the demonstrators left the university campus, thousands of citizens joined their ranks.¹¹

There were other anti-Israeli and anti-American reactions throughout Egyptian society. In early April 2002 the Artists Syndicate issued a statement in support of Yasser Arafat and the Palestinian people and the Pharmacists' Syndicate "announced a boycott of imported American medicines that have a generic equivalent in Egypt."¹² On April 7 "hundreds of lawyers at the Bar association held their third anti-Israeli demonstration in two weeks followed by a 3-hour sit-in."¹³ Other protests, demonstrations and expressions of solidarity with the Palestinian people took place throughout the month. The Egyptian Trade Union Federation located in Central Cairo, for example, hung a large banner outside their building which read, "Israel is the mother of terrorism." The Egyptian pilots union demanded the suspension of all flights to Israel and an Egyptian businessman's association reportedly encouraged its members to withdraw monies in the United States and direct all purchases to other countries, because of American support for Israel.¹⁴

In part reacting to this pressure, the Egyptian government announced in early April 2002 that it was suspending all ties with Israel except political relations.¹⁵ This meant the termination of economic and cultural ties between the two countries (The Egyptian Ambassador to Tel Aviv had been recalled more than a year earlier). On April 4,

President Mubarak addressed the nation in a televised speech about the troubling situation in Palestine, expressing solidarity with the Palestinians, criticizing Israeli policy and declaring Egypt's commitment to justice. Later in April, Suzanne Mubarak, the President's wife, led a solidarity convoy with Ministers and prominent Egyptian personalities that delivered nine million Egyptian pounds worth of medicine and food to Palestinians in Gaza. This humanitarian mission, under the auspices of the Egyptian Red Crescent Society, was widely publicized in the Egyptian press and made the cover of the May 5 issue of *Oktober* magazine.¹⁶

There were two other quite remarkable manifestations of anti-Israeli and anti-American sentiment worth mentioning. First, there was a highly publicized boycott of American products. This was not just a call to stop buying US goods, but a sophisticated campaign that used a range of tactics. For example, detailed lists of commodities circulated by hand and via the Internet--everything from shampoo to computer products and electrical items, from candies to car batteries. The lists included the names of US products and their locally available substitutes. So, for example, in case you didn't know that AC Delco was an American car battery, these lists encouraged you to buy Varta or National batteries instead, made in Germany and Japan respectively. Consumers were asked to substitute Samsung and Mitsubishi products for General Electric and Carrier. Some lists extended to fifteen pages and were circulated on the streets of Cairo and Alexandria, in supermarkets and pharmacies and over the Internet. Postcards were also distributed which read, "Boycott them" and displayed the logos of American companies (e.g., McDonald's, Lay's potato chips, Marlboro, Coca Cola, Always feminine hygiene products, etc...). The postcards included the picture of a martyred Palestinian child, stone throwing Palestinian youth and the words: "Their weapon is resistance and ours is boycott. Boycott is our weapon against (the) America that butchers us."

The second quite remarkable manifestation of anti-Israeli sentiment and solidarity with the Palestinians was the number of young men and women who attempted to enter Gaza to join the Palestinian resistance. In mid April 2002, Milad Hemeida, a twenty four year old from a Delta village, was killed by Israeli soldiers after he managed to get past the Egyptian border patrol.¹⁷ Shortly after this incident, six others, including two young women, also tried to enter Gaza but were caught by the more alert border guards. When interviewed later, one of the women said that she wanted to perform a suicide mission against the Israelis in order to help the Palestinians in their struggle against Israeli occupation. More recently, the body of an Egyptian teenager washed ashore in Gaza in late June 2002. Most believe that he was attempting to swim to Gaza to avoid the border crossing.

Egypt's Economy

Much of what I have discussed so far covers both Egyptian perceptions of the United States since 9/11 and some of the most important developments in Egyptian domestic politics in this period. Egypt's economy has also been affected by 9/11 and the "War on Terrorism" and it is to this issue that I will now turn briefly.

Well before the attacks on New York and Washington, the Egyptian economy had been suffering from a serious recession for at least two years. September 11, 2001 made matters considerably worse, however. In addition to the more general world economic slowdown, Egypt's economy has suffered specific losses as a result of 9/11 and the ongoing war on terrorism.

Tourism is, of course, crucial to the economy. In 2000, Egypt drew approximately 5.4 million visitors and the government hoped to increase this figure by 400,000 in 2001. Tourism accounted for \$4.3 billion in 2000, representing 10% of the country's gross domestic product and the sector employed 2.2 million people directly or indirectly.

By mid-November 2001 the Minister of Tourism, Mamdough El-Beltagi, announced a 40-45% drop in tourist activity. The national carrier, Egypt Air, declared that the number of passengers had dropped by 40%. At about the same time, the Minister of Transport, Ibrahim Al-Dumeiri, stated that the aviation sector had lost about \$82 million since September 11, 2001. Analysts estimated that the industry experienced a 20% decline by year-end.¹⁸

And in other economic developments not directly related to the attacks on New York and Washington, in the period after 9/11 remittances from Egyptians working abroad fell, as did revenues from the Suez Canal as a result of the slowdown in the international economy. And if this was not enough, 2001 also witnessed a 22% decline in the value of the Egyptian pound and the reemergence of a significant black market for foreign currency.¹⁹

Domestic Politics

In terms of domestic politics, one might conclude that September 11, 2001 and the rhetoric of terrorism as a new global scourge has provided the Egyptian government with yet another excuse to limit political freedoms and maintain Egypt's Emergency law (Law No. 162 of 1958), which has been in place since the assassination of Anwar Sadat in 1981. The Emergency Law gives greater powers to the police, suspends certain constitutional rights in the name of security, allows the state to detain individuals and censor and close newspapers more easily and allows authorities to try civilians in front of military and security courts under certain circumstances. Egyptian officials have gone so far as to point to the attacks on America and claim that Egypt's heavy-handed response to Islamic militants, including limitations on political freedoms, was appropriate and constitutes a model to be duplicated. The Egyptian Prime Minister Atef Abeid, for example, remarked that, "After these horrible crimes committed in New York and Virginia, maybe Western countries should begin to think of Egypt's own fight against terror as their new model."²⁰ Both Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, for example, have reported that since 9/11 more Egyptian civilians have been referred to military courts, a violation of international law and standards for fair trial.²¹ One serious question becomes how will 9/11 and the ongoing US "War on Terrorism" impact political freedom in Egypt and other countries over the short and medium term?

The demonstrations of March and April 2002 and the extent of anti-Israeli protest and anti-US feeling must also be understood in the context of US-Egyptian relations and Egyptian domestic politics. In terms of US-Egyptian relations, it is important to note that in the past the Egyptian government has tolerated certain forms of protest directed at Israel and the United States when these protests have been thought to be beneficial to the regime. The protests provide the Mubarak government leverage with American policy makers by signaling to Washington the extent to which US and Israeli policies are unpopular in Egypt and are troublesome for an important ally. Such policies make it difficult to defend Cairo's relationship with Washington to the Egyptian public and in this manner put pressure on Washington to rethink its policies or exert pressure on Israel.

Having stated this, however, it is important to note that the March and April demonstrations were *spontaneous* and the extent of popular feeling was *completely genuine*. In fact, although the protests never seriously threatened the regime, they did force the government to take action that it otherwise might not have taken (e.g., downgrading relations with Israel) and make efforts to appear to be actively supporting the Palestinians and their struggle (e.g., Mrs. Mubarak's convoy of medicine and food to Gaza and President Mubarak's April 4 speech).²² In other words, massive popular demonstrations forced the government to react in order to appear not to be out of touch with popular sentiment and domestic attitudes.

March and April of 2002 are also important for what they might reveal about the possibility of political and collective action in Egypt. When a small window of opportunity for political activity opened up, local actors organized immediately and were able to act collectively and throughout the nation on a massive scale. Large numbers of Egyptians engaged in many forms of politics--when they had the opportunity. They were critical of US

policy, Israel and their own government. Political activity in authoritarian states has everything to do with structures of opportunity.

Conclusion

There have been other developments in the past year that have also impacted Egyptian perceptions of the United States.²³ Discussing all of these adequately is beyond the scope of this essay. What is disturbingly clear, however, is that Egyptian perceptions of the United States have never been more negative. Egyptians from all walks of life, urban and rural, educated and illiterate, rich and poor, are outraged at American policies in the region, particularly with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the current Iraq crisis.

While some have claimed that "anti-Americanism" stems primarily from misinformation from local media and distorted Hollywood images of American values, the core problem results from specific US foreign policies. Egyptians, like Arabs and Muslims elsewhere, are profoundly angered by three policies in particular: a bias toward Israel in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; the US-led sanctions against Iraq and now, the possibility of war; and Washington's consistent support for authoritarian regimes friendly to US interests. "Anti-Americanism" is thus not primarily about American culture or values (what the United States is), but about the way the United States conducts itself in the region and the world (what the United States does). Polling data confirms this.²³ Thus, policies that do not deal with this fundamental reality--such as the State Department's Public Diplomacy campaign to sell America to the Muslim World--are bound to fail.²⁴ The American response to 9/11 and the execution of the war on terrorism have only made matters worse. Egyptian perceptions of America have become more negative as a result of the US war on Afghanistan, Washington's almost total support for Ariel Sharon, new policies directed at Arab and Muslim immigrants and visitors to the United States and, most recently, the Bush administration's planned war on Iraq. It is important to remember, however, that perceptions are neither fixed, timeless, unchanging or static. Nor are they completely irrational. Egyptian perceptions of the United States are primarily a result of Washington's policies. If policies change, so will perceptions.

This essay's second conclusion concerns Egypt's changing domestic politics. The year after 9/11 saw increased political activity, including mass political protest. Egypt witnessed protests in March and April 2002 the likes of which have not been seen for over a decade. Political action was also diverse, spatially, in form and in make-up. Politics took the form of grass roots activism, demonstrations, protests, banners, sit-ins, boycotts and organizational action. All of Egypt's major cities were affected, as well as the country's towns. Protests took place in both Upper and Lower Egypt. And solidarity with the Palestinians and criticism of the United States and Israel came from the entire political spectrum--from the Islamists to the secular left, inside the mosques and on university campuses. All sectors of Egyptian society were represented: rich and poor, educated and illiterate, male and female. At times, political activity had anti-regime undertones. And if President George W. Bush launches a war against Iraq, Egyptian perceptions of the United States will reach even greater depths.

Endnotes

¹ <http://usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs/terrornet/04.htm>. The US State Department has made much of Tantawi's comments. They are featured prominently in their publication, *The Network of Terrorism*. This glossy pamphlet, of which 1.3 million copies have been published and which has been translated into 36 languages, is part of the State Department's efforts to win the war for the hearts and minds.

² This is also reflected in the findings of the Gallup Poll released in February 2002. The poll of nearly ten thousand respondents in nine predominantly Muslim countries found that 61% of respondents did not think Arabs were involved in the September 11 attacks while 21% responded that they did not know. Egypt was not

one of the countries surveyed. See *The Gallup Poll Tuesday Briefing* (The Gallup Poll of the Islamic World), Princeton New Jersey, February 2002.

³ Fawzi's perspective was reflective of public opinion in the Arab and Muslim world. See *The Gallup Poll Tuesday Briefing*, op. cit. This perspective was also widely prevalent among Cairene intellectuals. See the interview with Mohamed Heikal, Egypt's leading journalist for much of the 50s and 60s, entitled "There isn't a target in Afghanistan worth a \$1 million missile - Mohamed Heikal, the Arab world's foremost political commentator, talks with Stephen Moss," which appeared in *The Guardian*, October 10, 2001.

⁴ See the political cartoon that appeared on the front page of *Al Wafd* on January 23, 2002, for example. The image is of George Bush and a Dracula-like Ariel Sharon each holding a piece of cake. The pieces are cut from a larger cake clearly representing the globe. Sharon's piece is labeled "Palestine" while Bush's slice is labeled "Afghanistan." The caption reads, "Bush celebrates the passing of a year since he became President" and Ariel Sharon's comment is "Happy Birthday *ya Gamil* (oh beautiful)."

⁵ Magdy Mehanna, "America ... and Egypt," *Al Wafd*, January 14, 2002.

⁶ See Scott B. MacDonald, "Egypt - Coping with 9/11 and the Global Slowdown," *KWR International Advisor* # 11, November 2001, and *Egypt Country Report August 2002*, Economist Intelligence Unit, p. 23.

⁷ Less frequent protests took place at Suez University and the American University in Cairo.

⁸ See Ashraf Khalil, Paul Schemm and Issandr El Amrani, "Boiling Point," in *Cairo Times*, vol. 6, Issue 5, April 4-10, 2002.

⁹ Dina Abulfotuh, "AUC in Action," in *AUC Today: The American University in Cairo Magazine*, Fall 2002, p. 14.

¹⁰ One interesting institutional development that resulted from this activity was the emergence of the Egyptian Popular Committee in Solidarity with the Intifada (EPCSPI). This diverse group reportedly organized many of the demonstrations around the country. See the interview with one of the group's founders, Adel El-Mashad in the September 26-October 2 issue of *Al Ahram Weekly*. See also Amira Howeidy, "A New Political Map," *Al Ahram Weekly*, April 18-24, 2002.

¹¹ Amira Howeidy, "Solidarity in search of a Vision," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, April 11-17, 2002.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Egyptian businessmen society halts relations with Israeli companies," *ArabicNews.com*, April 24, 2002.

¹⁵ "Egypt scales down Israel contacts," *BBC News*, Wednesday April 3, 2002.

¹⁶ See the article entitled "We feel a special Duty Toward the Palestinian Woman," *Oktober* May 5 (Sunday), pp. 59-61, including the many photos of the solidarity convoy. Undoubtedly, the regime was attempting to demonstrate its commitment to this issue.

¹⁷ Amira Howeidy, "Crossing to Martyrdom" *Al Ahram Weekly*, April 25-May 1, 2002. This story was also featured in the US press. See Tim Golden, "Young Egyptians Hearing Call of 'Martyrdom,'" *New York Times*, April 26, 2002.

- 18** See Abeer Allam, 'Egypt Puts Up Vacancy Signs,' *New York Times*, November 28, 2001.
- 19** See *Egypt: Country Report September 2002*, Economist Intelligence Unit, London, UK.
- 20** See http://www.amnestyusa.org/amnestynow/war_terrorism.html
- 21** Ibid. See also *Human Rights Watch World Report 2002* at <http://www.hrw.org/wr2k2/>.
- 22** http://www.presidency.gov.eg/html/4-Apr2002_address.html (entitled "President Mubarak's address to the nation on grave situation in the Palestinian territories").
- 23** Five of the most important developments have been Washington's reaction to the Saad Eddin Ibrahim trial, the Egyptian academic and democracy activist who was jailed and holds US citizenship; a controversial article written by the US Ambassador in Cairo, David Welch, which criticized Egyptian journalists for giving credence to conspiracy theories about 9/11 a year after the attacks; *Horse Without A Horseman*, the Egyptian television serial which aired during the month of Ramadan in 2002 and which some observers thought contained anti-Semitic elements; criticism of Egypt in the US media; and of course, President Bush's Iraq policy.
- 24** See James J. Zogby, *What Arabs Think: Values, Beliefs and Concerns* (Report of Zogby International Commissioned by the Arab Thought Foundation), September 2002. See also Mark Tessler's essay on this website: "Arab and Muslim Political Attitudes: Stereotypes and Evidence from Survey Research."
- 25** Samer Shehata, "Why Bush's Middle East Propaganda Campaign Won't Work," www.salon.com (July 12, 2002).