

## **Tunisian Perceptions of U.S. Foreign Policy: Conclusions of an Annual Survey of Tunisian Elites**

**By Peter J. Schraeder**

*Peter J. Schraeder is a Professor in the Department of Political Science at Loyola University Chicago. He has lived, worked, and lectured in twenty-nine countries in all regions of the African continent, and is the author or editor of ten books.*

This article draws on a survey of elite Tunisian attitudes toward U.S. foreign policy that the author conducts in Tunisia every January since spending the 2002-03 academic year as a Fulbright scholar with the Faculty of Law and Political Science at the University of Tunis. Tunisia serves as a fascinating case study for understanding the public opinion, public diplomacy, and foreign policy challenges confronted by U.S. policymakers in the Middle East and North Africa. Historically perceived in Washington as a moderate, pro-West ally in the Arab world, and more recently as a valuable partner in the global war on terrorism, Tunisia has been courted by both the Bush and the Obama administrations. In 2004, for example, Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987-present) was granted a highly coveted head-of-state visit to Washington as a reward for his close cooperation with U.S. counter-terrorism efforts in North Africa.

These close and strengthening ties notwithstanding, survey results demonstrate deep concerns among the Tunisian elite with various aspects of U.S. foreign policy. Survey results also indicate that the recent decline in U.S. prestige, most notably in the Arab and wider Islamic worlds, is neither inevitable nor irreversible, but dependent on a rethinking of the U.S. foreign policy approach to the region. Several points are in order.

First, the survey data demonstrate that the Tunisian elite have a sophisticated historical understanding of U.S. foreign policy. They maintain positive impressions (an average rating of 46 percent positive throughout the survey period) of U.S. foreign policy during the World War II era (1935-45), most notably the North African military campaigns that have as their reminder the

2,841 U.S. military personnel buried at the North Africa American Cemetery and Memorial in Carthage (a suburb of Tunis, the capital of Tunisia). They remember even more fondly (an average rating of 56 percent positive throughout the survey period) Washington's support for independence movements throughout North Africa, beginning with Libyan independence in 1951 and ending with Algerian independence in 1962. However, the Tunisian elite are much more critical of U.S. foreign policy in recent years (see Table 1). In January 2003 (the first year of the survey), 67 percent responded negatively to the question – “What is your impression of U.S. foreign policy in general?” – with this figure rising to an astounding 92 percent negative beginning in January 2004.

These figures coincided with negative Tunisian impressions of the Bush administration, which never achieved more than a 19 percent positive rating throughout the survey period. Although the Obama administration, which achieved a 67 percent positive rating in January 2009 and a 65 percent positive rating in January 2010, appeared poised to reset U.S. relations with the Arab world, Tunisians clearly differentiate between Obama “the man” and his administration's foreign policy. By January 2010, the one-year anniversary of Obama's inauguration, 90 percent of Tunisians held a negative impression of U.S. foreign policy in general.

The classic factor driving America's negative standing in Tunisia and the wider Arab and Islamic worlds – which is borne out by the survey data – is U.S. foreign policy toward the Arab-Israeli conflict, and more specifically Washington's approach to the Arab-Israeli peace process and the creation of an independent Palestine. The Tunisian elite were highly critical of what they perceived as the Bush administration's unwillingness to pursue a resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict more aggressively, as witnessed by an astounding 98 percent negative rating for this dimension of Bush administration foreign policy in January 2003. It is striking that the Obama administration similarly received a 90 percent negative rating for its approach to the Arab-Israeli conflict in January 2010, despite President Obama's declaration that he would make the pursuit of Middle East peace an administration priority, as well as his much-heralded June 2009 speech in Cairo, Egypt, on Islam and the U.S. relationship with the Islamic world. Follow-up discussions with survey respondents revealed that although Tunisians welcomed and appreciated the positive tone of Obama's Cairo speech, they believed that little if anything concrete in promoting the Arab-Israeli peace process had resulted from the speech during the remainder of 2009.

A second and more recent factor driving America's negative standing in Tunisia and the wider Arab and Islamic worlds – which is also borne out by the survey data – involves U.S. military interventions in the Middle East. Elite Tunisian impressions of U.S. military intervention in Iraq have remained extremely negative (above 90 percent) throughout the survey period, with the launching of this intervention in March 2003 serving as the single explanation (confirmed in follow-up interviews) for the dramatic rise in overall negative impressions of U.S. foreign policy from 67 percent negative in January 2003 (just prior to the beginning of the war) to 92 percent negative in January 2004 and remaining above 90 percent for the remainder of the Bush years. Only one of twelve U.S. military interventions included in the survey – the U.S. military effort

during World War II – has achieved a consistently high positive rating (average of 49 percent positive throughout the survey period). According to follow-up interviews, Tunisians underscore the “legitimacy” and “selflessness” of U.S. military intervention in World War II, whether in the Asian, European, or North African military theaters, and how this legacy starkly contrasts with what is perceived as an “illegitimate” and “self-interested” contemporary U.S. military intervention in Iraq. Although President Obama is credited with undertaking the beginning of the end of U.S. military intervention in Iraq, he is nonetheless criticized in elite Tunisian circles for expanding U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan. Only 5 percent of Tunisians as of January 2010 viewed U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan positively, as opposed to 95 percent who perceived it in negative terms, with this latter figure representing a significant increase from a 77 percent negative rating in January 2009. Tunisians now recognize Afghanistan as “Obama’s war” (as opposed to Iraq which is almost always referred to as “Bush’s war”) and are increasingly prone to characterize U.S. military involvement there as “illegitimate” and “self-interested.”

A third conclusion of the survey, which is typical of results found in other countries and regions of the world, is that Tunisians clearly differentiate between U.S. “governmental” policies and U.S. “society,” typically maintaining more positive images toward the latter (see Table 2). Positive impressions exceeding 75 percent are evident every year of the survey as concerns two important “goods” of American society: learning American English and studying at an American university. Several additional sets of American societal goods, such as separation of church and state, internet, literature, television, films, sports, music, and art, also typically achieved positive impressions of 50 percent or higher during the period of the survey.

In short, Tunisians still respect and admire many elements of U.S. society, despite their often strong distaste for specific U.S. foreign policies toward the Middle East and North Africa. As concerns the latter, public diplomacy and cultural exchange programs will fail to move Tunisian public opinion in a more positive direction in the absence of significant changes in policy, most notably an end to U.S. military intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan and the demonstration of concrete steps that contribute to a durable Arab-Israeli peace and most importantly an independent Palestinian state. The problem is not that Tunisians are unaware of or misunderstand U.S. foreign policy initiatives in their region, but that they disagree fundamentally with those policies.

**Table 1: Tunisian Impressions of U.S. Foreign Policy**

| <b>RATING</b>                          | <b>POSITIVE</b> |           |           |           |           | <b>NEUTRAL</b> |           |           |           |           | <b>NEGATIVE</b> |           |           |           |           | <b>TOTAL<br/>(100%)</b> |
|--|-----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------------------|
| <b>YEAR</b>                            | <b>03</b>       | <b>04</b> | <b>08</b> | <b>09</b> | <b>10</b> | <b>03</b>      | <b>04</b> | <b>08</b> | <b>09</b> | <b>10</b> | <b>03</b>       | <b>04</b> | <b>08</b> | <b>09</b> | <b>10</b> |                         |
| U.S. Foreign Policy<br>(in general)    | 19              | 8         | 5         | 5         | 5         | 15             | 0         | 0         | 25        | 5         | 67              | 92        | 95        | 70        | 90        |                         |
| Bush Administration<br>(2001-2009)     | 19              | 7         | 9         | -         | -         | 13             | 0         | 5         | -         | -         | 68              | 93        | 86        | -         | -         |                         |
| Obama Administration<br>(2009-Present) | -               | -         | -         | 67        | 65        | -              | -         | -         | 24        | 15        | -               | -         | -         | 10        | 20        |                         |
| War in Afghanistan (2002-<br>present)  | 13              | 7         | 18        | 19        | 5         | 6              | 7         | 5         | 5         | 0         | 81              | 86        | 77        | 77        | 95        |                         |
| War in Iraq (2003-present)             | 4               | 7         | 9         | 5         | 0         | 0              | 0         | 0         | 5         | 0         | 96              | 93        | 91        | 90        | 100       |                         |
| Arab-Israeli Conflict                  | 0               | 0         | 9         | 5         | 0         | 2              | 0         | 5         | 5         | 10        | 98              | 100       | 86        | 90        | 90        |                         |

**Table 2: Tunisian Impressions of U.S. Society**

| <b>RATING</b>                      | <b>POSITIVE</b> |           |           |           |           | <b>NEUTRAL</b> |           |           |           |           | <b>NEGATIVE</b> |           |           |           |           | <b>TOTAL<br/>(100%)</b> |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------------------|
| <b>YEAR</b>                        | <b>03</b>       | <b>04</b> | <b>08</b> | <b>09</b> | <b>10</b> | <b>03</b>      | <b>04</b> | <b>08</b> | <b>09</b> | <b>10</b> | <b>03</b>       | <b>04</b> | <b>08</b> | <b>09</b> | <b>10</b> |                         |
| Democratic System                  | 51              | 23        | 36        | 55        | 40        | 15             | 23        | 23        | 15        | 20        | 34              | 54        | 41        | 30        | 40        |                         |
| Liberal Economic Model             | 62              | 43        | 32        | 70        | 60        | 17             | 21        | 32        | 5         | 30        | 21              | 36        | 36        | 25        | 10        |                         |
| Separation Church/State            | 60              | 64        | 77        | 85        | 90        | 32             | 29        | 18        | 10        | 10        | 8               | 7         | 5         | 5         | 0         |                         |
| Department of Homeland<br>Security | 43              | 21        | 14        | 50        | 25        | 32             | 29        | 36        | 20        | 45        | 25              | 50        | 50        | 30        | 30        |                         |
| Immigration Policy                 | 19              | 7         | 18        | 25        | 25        | 11             | 7         | 9         | 10        | 5         | 70              | 86        | 73        | 65        | 70        |                         |
| American Language                  | 83              | 92        | 77        | 85        | 95        | 13             | 7         | 18        | 10        | 5         | 4               | 0         | 5         | 5         | 0         |                         |
| University System                  | 83              | 92        | 82        | 95        | 100       | 15             | 7         | 14        | 5         | 0         | 2               | 0         | 5         | 0         | 0         |                         |
| Internet                           | 66              | 79        | 45        | 85        | 85        | 26             | 21        | 41        | 15        | 10        | 8               | 0         | 14        | 0         | 5         |                         |
| Literature                         | 56              | 29        | 64        | 70        | 55        | 38             | 43        | 32        | 30        | 45        | 6               | 29        | 5         | 0         | 0         |                         |
| Television                         | 47              | 36        | 50        | 75        | 70        | 28             | 7         | 27        | 15        | 25        | 25              | 57        | 23        | 10        | 5         |                         |
| Films                              | 67              | 92        | 82        | 90        | 95        | 17             | 0         | 9         | 5         | 5         | 16              | 8         | 29        | 5         | 0         |                         |
| Sports                             | 78              | 50        | 59        | 50        | 60        | 22             | 43        | 27        | 25        | 35        | 0               | 7         | 14        | 25        | 5         |                         |
| Music                              | 65              | 64        | 64        | 90        | 85        | 29             | 21        | 27        | 5         | 15        | 6               | 14        | 9         | 5         | 0         |                         |
| Art                                | 63              | 21        | 59        | 85        | 80        | 29             | 64        | 36        | 15        | 20        | 8               | 14        | 5         | 0         | 0         |                         |