

Is the Global Financial Crisis Aggravating Anti-Americanism in the MENA Region? What Arab Media Coverage Suggests

The global financial crisis has been a much discussed topic in Arab media in the past couple of years and in many blogs and discussion forums, in particular, it has been a magnet for criticism of US foreign policy. Coverage of the crisis in “traditional” outlets such as Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, and many domestic newspapers is often factual and focused on economic issues, but many commentators in blogs and discussion forums link the crisis to, among other things, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and to a perceived immorality with which the United States deals with the downtrodden and poor. Most of the arguments reinforce existing negative arguments about the United States and its role internationally and in the Middle East. Some say the global financial crisis represents the first concrete sign of the inevitable downfall of the United States, which the likes of Osama Bin Laden have been talking about for years.

Although it is not clear the extent to which criticisms of the United States over the global financial crisis in blogs, discussion forums, and to a lesser extent Arab media reflect or impact broader public opinion, the criticisms highlight the extent to which some in the region view even seemingly apolitical economic issues within the context of US foreign policy. They suggest a strong mistrust of US intentions and a continued decrease in respect for US power and influence. Many commentators say the financial crisis is further evidence that the United States has lost or is losing its ability to wage future wars, drive global economic growth and development, or promote its overall foreign policy goals. In response, the Arab world needs to identify ways to reduce or eliminate dependence on the United States and increase regional cooperation, many of them say.

Arab media generally have not linked the US economic crisis and the global spillover directly to the widespread problems of unemployment and poverty in many countries in the region. A March 2009 discussion on Al Jazeera’s *The Economy and the People*, suggests that one of the reasons for this is that Arab media in general have not addressed the effects of the crisis on the man on the street but have focused primarily on its impact on regional or local stock markets and investors. Guests on the Al Jazeera program indicated the reasons for this may include, among other factors: reporting on the financial crisis is new for many journalists and they are uncertain how they should cover it; in Morocco, most of the reporting on the financial crisis is in French, which may lead many poorer Moroccans to believe it involves only Europe and the United States; and Arab governments may be discouraging journalists from reporting on the effects of the crisis.¹ Others suggest some Arab governments have not been entirely transparent about the crisis and have downplayed any impact on employment, possibly because it would antagonize students and others already discouraged by poor job prospects.² Aside from these points, the economic conditions of the many unemployed and poor in countries

¹ “The Role of Arab Economic Media in Reporting on the Financial Crisis”, 16 March 2009, Al Jazeera *The Economy and the People*

such as Egypt, Jordan, and Morocco have been extremely difficult for years, significantly reducing the possibility they would accept arguments that put much of the blame for these problems on the United States.

The most common criticisms of the US role in the global financial crisis revolve around four general themes: 1) capitalism has failed and the world needs to adopt a more just Islamic system 2) the United States has been and will continue to exploit countries in the Middle East to get itself out of the crisis and cannot be trusted 3) the Arab world should take advantage of the US weakness to enhance its own influence 4) The US empire and global hegemony are coming to an end. For the most part, the negative commentary on the crisis does not reflect broader Arab media coverage but represents the ways in which selected individuals—including in Arab media—have presented the crisis in public arguments. Details of these arguments include:

- I. ***Capitalism has failed and the world needs to adopt a more just Islamic system.*** This is perhaps the most widespread commentary related to the crisis. Al Jazeera in particular has had many discussions on the merits of an Islamic versus capitalist system but the issue also has been addressed in many traditional media outlets.³⁴⁵⁶

While much of the discussion of the merits of capitalism in traditional media outlets examines both the pros and cons of capitalism, commentators in blogs and discussion forums, in particular, focus on its moral shortcomings. They criticize capitalism for being based on greed, corruption, and deceit and say it aggravates tensions between rich and poor both within and among countries. In a report on a conference at Al Azhar University in Cairo, for example, kharajeh.com quotes the Director of the Saleh Kamel Center for Islamic Economy at Al Azhar as saying that usury and investments involving “deceit”, “gambling”, and speculation are the key sources of the crisis.⁷ At a similar conference at Cairo University, alnabanews.com cites Egyptian economist Ahmed al Najjar as arguing that the US financial crisis occurred in part because profit-seeking companies produced more than workers could consume with their limited incomes, forcing them to take out loans to finance purchases such as houses and cars.⁸ Finally, Tunisian author Khalid Tawari opines in a March 2009 article on AlJazeera.net that the stock market has diverged from its originally envisioned role of facilitating the provision of capital to become a

² “Arab Dialogue: How to Overcome the Economic Crisis and Counteract It?” 31 January 2009 Al Arabiya

³ “The Reality of the Islamic Solution to the Global Economic Crisis,” 13 April 2009, Al Jazeera.net

⁴ “The Financial Crisis and the Future of the Capitalist System,” 5 January 2009, Al Jazeera.net

⁵ “After The Global Financial System: Is This the End of Globalization?”, 12 January 2010, daralhayat.com

⁶ “The Global Financial Crisis is Not the End or Fall of Capitalism”, 26 October 2008, moheet.com

⁷ “The Financial Crisis From an Islamic Perspective,” 16 May 2009, alkharaheh.com

⁸ Alnabanews.com “America has been stealing the world’s economic resources since 2002”. 12 May 2010

24-hour global casino in which investors are able to play with people's lives and money for their own benefit.⁹

Anti-capitalist arguments have also been integrated into public protests, particularly in Egypt. Extensive protests in recent months by a large variety of students and workers have called for the unraveling of the capitalist system and an increase in government involvement and supervision of the economy.¹⁰ A reader commenting on a May 2010 article in the Egyptian newspaper Al Masry al Youm on a sharp drop in the Egyptian stock market complained that "unsupervised" American and other foreign investors were responsible for the downturn in the market and for stealing the money of ordinary Egyptians.¹¹ Intellectuals also have linked capitalism and neo-liberalism (but not the United States) directly to problems of poverty and unemployment. Hamdi Abedelazim, for example, economist and former president of the Sadat Academy for Administrative Sciences in Cairo, said in an 18 January 2010 article by the InterPress Service that "Egypt's experiment with neo-liberal economics has resulted in soaring inflation, steadily increasing unemployment, and a reduction of the average citizen's purchasing power." Ibrahim El-Issawi, professor of economist at the Cairo-based Institute of National Planning, argued in a December 2009 article in al Ahram that a continuation of current neo-liberal policies would lead to a "bleak future" in which "underdevelopment and dependency" persisted.¹²

Those favoring an Islamic system argue that such a system is both more moral and secure.¹³ In the alnabanews.com report from the symposium on the global financial crisis at the University of Cairo, Abdul Hamid al Ghazali, Professor of Economics at the University of Cairo, argued that an Islamic system helps promote the good of the nation and the humanity of workers.¹⁴ Another participant at the conference said the benefits of an Islamic system were clear from the fact that the United States has 40 Islamic financial institutions that have not been affected by the crisis. In the conference at Al Azhar reported by alnabanews.com, Dr. Youssef Ibrahim Youssef, Director of the Saleh Kamel center for Islamic economy at Azhar, said the decline in interest rates in the United States to close to zero proves that the Islamic financial system is the natural way to manage an economy.¹⁵

⁹ Khaled Tawari, "The Stock Market Crisis and The Islamic Approach" 10 March 2009, AlJazeera.net

¹⁰ "400 Demonstrations in Cairo to Increase Wages", 3 April 2010, Al Jazeera.net

¹¹ "Black Tuesday Hits the World...The Egyptian Stock Market Falls 3 Percent Amidst Downturn in Global Markets" 23 May 2010, Al Masry Al Youm

¹² "Egypt: Economists Blame Neo-Liberalism for Region's Woes", 18 January 2010, Inter Press Service

¹³ "Arab Dialogue: How to Overcome the Economic Crisis and Counteract It?" 31 January 2009 Al Arabiya

¹⁴ "The Financial Crisis From an Islamic Perspective," 16 May 2009, alkhrajeh.com

II. Another common argument is that *The United States has been and will continue to exploit countries in the Middle East to get itself out of the crisis and cannot be trusted*. Commentaries along this line question the morality of the United States and reinforce arguments such as that the United States invaded Iraq to exploit its oil. It is similar to the criticism of capitalism in that the United States is charged with enriching itself at the expense of others. In a moderated discussion of the crisis on Al Arab al Youm.com, a Jordanian who describes himself as a member of the Anti-Normalization Committee of the Jordanian Writer's League argues that wars and plunder are one of the key ways capitalist systems get out of crises and that the United States has used and will continue to use wars for this purpose.¹⁶ In an article on alhewaraat.com on the dangers of the American financial crisis, an Iraqi economist in France indicates that the United States will exploit the resources of the countries it is occupying to get out of its crisis because higher oil prices and increased investments from the Gulf and Asia will not be enough to address its financial imbalance.¹⁷ Finally, in response to an online discussion initiated by the Euro Arab Center for Studies in Paris on the role of Saudi Arabia at the 2009 G20 summit, several discussants thought that while the Saudi involvement in the summit was a positive sign of its perceived importance to the global economy, they did not trust US intentions and thought the United States might use Saudi Arabia in ways that were not in the Kingdom's or the region's best interests.¹⁸ While these arguments are not new, they are important to be aware of and to monitor because they can provide insights into potential regional responses to future US attempts to access natural resources in places such as Iraq or Afghanistan, attract Arab investment to the west, or engage in joint economic initiatives. Indeed, a few commentators thought the reason the United States held a global summit of Muslim entrepreneurs in Washington, DC, in April 2010 was to attract Arab investment to dig the United States out of its financial crisis.¹⁹ Fahmy Howeidly noted in a blog entry entitled "The New American Prank" that the US government's focus on economic issues at the summit did not seem sincere and was – like Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's call for economic peace with the Palestinians - simply a ruse to deflect

¹⁵ Alnabaneews.com "America has been stealing the world's economic resources since 2002". 12 May 2010

¹⁶ Discussion in response to the following question: "What do you think are some solutions to the global financial crisis?" 24 May 2009 alarabalyawn.net

¹⁷ "The Seriousness of the US financial crisis For the Global Economy" 4/4/2008. www.hewaraat.com.

¹⁸ "How do you evaluate the role of Saudi Arabia at the Group of 20 Summit?" www.ceea.com 31 May 2009

¹⁹ "Obama Renews His Commitment to the Arab World" 13 May 2010, Al Jazeera.net (examples of reader comments that the US held the summit to attract Arab funds to bail the US out of its financial crisis). See also "Mahmoud Jooma "The Summit of Entrepreneurs...Extortion and Acquiescence", Al Jazeera.net 12 May 2010.

attention from pressing political issues.²⁰ Results of a poll undertaken by Yahoo! Maktoob and InterMedia Survey Institute shortly after the summit revealed similar skepticism about US intentions. Although one of the objectives of the summit was to help promote indigenous investment in the Arab world to promote higher growth and eventually create jobs, sixty-eight percent of the 925 Jordanians, Moroccans, Egyptians, and Saudis who participated in the poll thought the United States was somewhat or very uncommitted to the region's economic development.²¹

III. *The Arab world should take advantage of the US weakness to enhance its own influence.* This is an argument commentators have made either to protest US policies or to encourage inter-Arab cooperation. There is a sense that the Arab world has a unique opportunity to benefit from the perceived weakness of the United States brought on, in part, by the global financial crisis. A blogger on elaph.com, for example, argues that the United States has been weakened by many recent crises, including the global financial downturn, and says the Arab world should take advantage of the decline in US power to hold an Arab summit and promote common economic, military, and political interests.²² A contributor to Shareah.com similarly argues that the global financial crisis gives the Arab world an opportunity to escape from the domination of the United States.²³ Finally, in an article on aleqt.com, a self-described consultant to the Saudi Industrial Development Fund encourages the Arab world to position itself to play a more influential role in the world as the hegemony of the dollar inevitably ends and as China and the United States struggle for global dominance.²⁴

Some commentators also argue that Arab investors should remove their money from the United States because America is no longer a reliable partner and will not protect their interests. The President of the Euro Arab Center for Studies in Paris, for example, asks in an article on mutawassitonline.com why the Saudis in particular and the Gulf states in general continue to invest in the United States even though it does not have their best interests in mind.²⁵ In a January 2009 discussion on Al Arabiya, a viewer from Saudi Arabia argued that the

²⁰ "The New American Prank", 29 April 2010, Fahmy Howeidy, Maktoobblog.com

²¹ 10 May 2010 poll open to respondents through the Middle East and conducted through Yahoo! Maktoob's online research panel.

²² "Foreign Policy of the United States of America." "elaph.com/blog Hassam Digni 2/17/2010.

²³ "The Islamic World Between Dependence and Independence" 10 April 2010 www.shareah.com

²⁴ "Where Are We in the Raging War Between the United States and China?" 8 February 2010, www.aleqt.com

²⁵ "The United States Economy Declines: Stop Squandering Money" 17 January 2010 Mutawassitonline.com

solution to the global financial crisis was to withdraw all Arab money from the west.²⁶

While the call for inter-Arab cooperation is not new and is likely, for several reasons, to remain an elusive goal, the discussions surrounding it in relation to the global financial crisis are important because they point to a loss of credibility by the United States, even on economic issues. Indeed, in a 3 May 2010 editorial commenting on a European report on economic, social, and political developments in Lebanon in the past five years, Lebanon's Daily Star cautions the United States and other western powers from doling out advice to the developing world, suggesting their inability to manage their own economies and deal with the global financial crisis brings into question their credibility. According to the editorial, "it is not the best moment for Western organizations and states to make their usual pronouncements on what needs to be done to get the affairs of the developing world in order"... "Washington's representatives in Lebanon might see no contradiction in extending assistance to our Finance Ministry, of all places, as if conditions in the official circles of American finance and banking are healthy and worthy of emulation."²⁷

IV. ***The US empire and global hegemony are coming to an end.*** According to some observers, the global financial crisis is the first concrete sign of the inevitable fall of the US empire that the likes of Osama bin Laden have been anticipating for several years. According to an online poll by the Euro Arab Center for Studies in Paris that was reported on mutawassitonline.com, for example, 75 percent of the 1,000 poll respondents thought the financial crisis heralded the beginning of the end of the American empire. Some commentators say that the US will no longer be able to wage wars overseas or to use the threat of war as a way to promote its foreign policy interests.²⁸ On the Ikwahnonline website, run by Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, one blogger opines that the financial crisis has weakened US power and will allow one or several new countries to increase their influence and reduce the "iron grip" the United States has imposed on the third world. Eventually, according to the author, the crisis will force the United States to reduce its support to Israel, increasing the potential to achieve a just peace between Arabs and the Palestinians.²⁹ Similarly, participants in a discussion on mbc.net suggest that the crisis will lead the United States to reduce its forces in Afghanistan and Iraq.³⁰

²⁶ "Arab Dialogue: How to Overcome the Economic Crisis and Counteract It?" 31 January 2009 Al Arabiya

²⁷ "Accountability is Key to Reform," 15 May 2010, The Daily Star

²⁸ "The United States Economy Declines: Stop Squandering Money" 17 January 2010 Mutawassitonline.com

²⁹ Ali, Issam. "The Financial Crisis: Risks and Opportunities. 13 September 2009, Ikwahnonline.com

³⁰ "Financial Crisis of 2009, The Important America", mbc.net

Many of the above critiques of the United States are not widespread in traditional Arab media, but this could change as the crisis develops. The global financial downturn can easily be seen as one of the first concrete manifestations of a decline of the United States, and arguments critical of America within the context of the crisis may have a higher likelihood of catching on than criticisms within other contexts. Additionally, it remains unclear the extent to which coverage of the crisis in Arab media reflects broader public opinion. Indeed, those who finance traditional media may be more likely than the general public to have a stake in the neo-liberal economic system which the current global financial challenges have called into question and therefore less likely than the public to be critical of it. If the financial crisis generates widespread public anger or distrust against the United States, it could boost pressure on governments to reduce investments in the United States, encourage attacks on US businesses in the region, increase the momentum for enhanced ties with China, or further reduce the ability of the United States to promote other foreign policy objectives.

Diana Turecek is the Regional Research Manager for the Middle East and Africa at the InterMedia Survey Institute in Washington, DC. (turecekd@intermedia.org)