Episode Transcript

Episode Title:
How the Middle East Views the U.S. Election

Guest:
Hassan Barari
Jon Alterman:
Hassan Barari is a professor of international politics at Qatar University. He is on leave from his position as a professor of political science at the University of Jordan. He's the author of something like ten books and somebody I've known for many years. Hassan, welcome to Babel.

Hassan Barari:
Thanks for having me, Jon.

Jon Alterman:
How much attention are people in the Arab world paying to the U.S. presidential elections?

Hassan Barari:
They've been following all elections, but this one is unique. It's unique because of the character of Trump and because of his policies and beliefs, because of his statements when he talks about our leaders, and because of the damage that he has done to American standing in the region. So people really are watching this election and I would say the majority of them—I don't have statistics, but this is my impression—the majority of them want Biden to win and want Trump to leave, because he has frightened them in the Middle East.

Jon Alterman:
I've been watching Arab television for decades, and I've seen any number of commentators urging the United States to leave the Middle East. There seems to be significant popular sentiment wanting the U.S. government to leave. Why, suddenly, are people afraid that a U.S. president might do it and arguably fulfilling the wish of what people have been calling for decades?

Hassan Barari:
Arab Regimes want the United States to stay in the region. They suspect that America has become more disengaged from the Middle East over the last probably 10 years. With the pivot to Asia, the Americans want to shift their resources to do something else somewhere else. But the problem here is this vacuum, this strategic vacuum that would be left by the United States. Who's going to fill that vacuum? This is one of the key questions.

Jon Alterman:
When I talk to people in the White House, they all say, "Look, the president was right, that they moved the embassy to Jerusalem, and there wasn't a big hue and cry. There's a peace deal between Israel and the United Arab Emirates. And there wasn't a big hue and cry, that all of these sacred cows that people thought were inviolable, were violated and there wasn't an uprising. There were protests. I mean, the protests are in the past. And the argument that people make is that people have moved on. They're concerned with domestic bread and butter issues. They're concerned with other things and Palestinians are an artifact of an older generation. Why is that not accurate, in your view?

Hassan Barari:
No, I'm not saying that. I think the way the administration has lead the way is correct. Our public just say things. They don't really do anything. And when they moved the embassy, I knew actually that people would practice, would do some demonstrations and then they go back to business as usual. And this is
one of, probably, the driving forces of the American Republican party all the time. They really don't see
the Arab masses as something important. And they also look at the regimes. They see them as reliant
and dependent on the Americans. So it's as if Saudi Arabia, for instance, needs America more than
America needs Saudi Arabia. And because of that, Trump maybe would think "look, I can do it and they
don't give a damn," and then people would follow. They will maybe do some demonstration, protests,
but then nothing would happen.

The American interests would not see be jeopardized in this part of the world. This is the reading of the
administration, which is correct. I don't say it's not correct, but this is at the short term. If you look at
the long term, I think this kind of policy is shortsighted because it's not a recipe for stability in the
region.

**Jon Alterman:**

When I talked to both people in the Democratic party and the Republican party, they argue that the
future affection of Arab public for the United States isn't especially relevant to the affection of
governments toward the United States, which isn't especially relevant as we move to a world where
there is more energy in more places, and it's less centered on hydrocarbons and more centered on
renewables and other kinds of things, that where the Middle East is politically and socially and
economically in ten years is less important than it is now and where it will be socially, economically, and
politically in 20 years is less important than where we'll be in ten years. And so if this gulf opens up,
that's okay in the views of many strategists. How does the Middle East—both governments and
populations—how do they react to that reality?

**Hassan Barari:**

They understand this logic carefully, but here I'm talking about the fundamental issue of that if you want
to have a stable Middle East, you have to fix the problems. You can't impose one position or one opinion
on the people of the Middle East. I understand the benefits of power. I understand that people are
actually having no voice because of the lack of democracy. But in ten years down the road, things would
definitely change. And people would not accept to be ruled in the same way as we are being ruled right
now. You can see with the revolution of social media and the way people get organized; I think it's going
to have a difference. The last thing that people want to have with them at least is an imposed solution
on them. They might live with it for some years, but look, at one point they would try it up against this.
And the American allies would pay the price. Here, I'm talking about Arab regimes. They cannot stay
where they are with the same policies. And you've mentioned a very important thing that Middle East is
no longer probably relevant to the United States, or maybe in 10, 15 years down the road the oil things
will not be important for America, but Israel would be very important for America. And this has to do
with American domestic politics and Israel will definitely have trouble with its neighbors.

**Jon Alterman:**

What do you think Arabs expect a Biden policy toward the Middle East to look like? One of the
observations people have made is that the Trump Middle East strategy is not very different from the
Obama Middle East strategy. There's a consensus among both the United States has been over-
weighted in the region, that the United States shouldn't intervene heavily in Syria. Do you think people
expect a Biden policy should be extremely different, slightly different?

**Hassan Barari:**
It would be slightly different. I think it's also about style. The way Trump deals with the Middle East—he is a real estate man. He wants to cut deals. Biden, I think it would be different. The style would be totally different. He would not support the war in Yemen. This is what he said. And this would put a lot of pressure on the Saudis and the Americans to put an end to that war, he would probably negotiate with Iranians and they could reach a different deal. Or at least he would bring the United States back to the deal, and this would mitigate the tension in this part of the world.

But also, he wouldn't be that biased in the Arab-Israeli conflict. And this is very important for Palestinians and for Jordanians. I'm not saying it's very important for the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates. But also, at the same time, as I said, the style is very important.

**Jon Alterman:**

But it feels to me like there are a lot of American presidents who try to address the Arab street, who try to address issues with democratization, who try to push authoritarian governments to lighten their grip. And they have initial popularity and they end up leaving office very unpopular. You've expressed a lot of optimism that a Biden Administration would do a lot of things that a lot of Arabs would like. But I just, I wonder whether a Biden Administration after four years would be popular for having done the things you're calling on it to do, or whether there would still be friction between the United States government and the Arab street over any number of issues where the United States would be seen to be failing and that there's not the prospect of close ties of affinity that could last more than a year or two.

**Hassan Barari:**

I agree with your assessment. I'm not saying that Biden would solve the problem, but at least he would not make it worse. Trump has made it worse in his “deal of the century” and the way he brought Arab regimes to Washington to sign the normalization deals with Israel and people in the Middle East.

**Jon Alterman:**

But they're not protesting. I mean, what I've seen on social media is not overwhelmingly negative. What I've seen on social media is a combination of people who don't care and people who are supportive and people who are hostile. But it's not 90, ten against it.

**Hassan Barari:**

Yeah. I agree with you, but this is called negative realism. It doesn't mean that they condone what Trump has been doing to the Middle East. It's a different story here. I would say maybe the public, the Arab streets would not rise up against anything in masses, but also, it's going to create a lot of anti-Americanism in the region. And if I were president of the United States, I wouldn't look at the reaction. I would look at the sentiment in the street. And in the long run maybe, with the ascendance of other superpowers like China, they would compete with the Americans in the Middle East, with the mood that is anti-America.

It's not about the direct reaction to the American policies in the region. In the long run, I think America is going to leave. We're going to leave this part of the world. It all boils down to one thing that Biden and even Obama before him: they didn't do wonders in the Middle East, but they didn't make it worse. Now, Trump has come to office and he made it worse.

**Jon Alterman:**
I have been seeing anti-Americanism as a winning strategy in the Middle East, since at least the 1950s. I mean, you could argue that the King-Crane Commission represented the high watermark of people's trust in the Middle East, when the United States didn't have much of a footprint. And you could argue that the Chinese are benefiting now because they don't have much of a footprint. So it's unknown and people seem favorably disposed toward China. But it does seem to me that this idea of anti-Americanism is not highly variable, depending on whether you like President Trump or he's pro-Israeli or anything else. And anti-Americanism has been a populist thread in the Middle East. Perhaps because the US has been seen as a guarantor of a status quo that people don't like, but the anti-Americanism has been durable in the Middle East. It doesn't respond to exactly who the president is. It's a durable trend.

Hassan Barari:
Your assessment is correct here. I'm not talking about anti-Americanism because of Trump. I only say that he made it worse. Anti-Americanism has been in the Middle East for years and for decades actually, because of the alliance with autocrats in region and because of the occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan, and because of the special relationship with Israel that has not been helpful for making peace in the region. This is going to continue with this kind of anti-American. Maybe they don't see the utility of changing the mood in the Arab street. Hypothetically, I'm saying that if China rises to a level where it could compete to the United States in the Middle East, China will have more friends in the Middle East, at least at the popular level than the United States. So this is my point.

Jon Alterman:
When I was in Egypt in 1992, when George H. W. Bush was running for reelection against a young politician named Bill Clinton, Egyptians were dumbfounded that a president who had just won a war with Iraq will be turned out by the public. And at that time, Hosni Mubarak, I think had, had just been through his third term as president. And the idea of a change in government, the idea of a president not being reelected was a remarkable novelty to people in Egypt. You can have a society where people lose elections. Is that the real inspirational quality of the United States? Or am I missing something?

Hassan Barari:
I'm not sure that it has any link with inspirations in the Middle East. They all look at the American elections in this way—presidents come and go. So maybe for domestic reasons for the economic issues, but we have here a mindset. And then also once you become a president, you're going to stay president for life. I don't think that we're going to see the end of Sisi until probably he dies or from a political or maybe military coup d'état. There's one good term for this—we call it jumliqqiya in Arabic—which is republicans and monarchy at the same time. It is like Assad, or Gaddafi, who came to power in 1969 in and stayed until he got killed. So it seems to me that the political culture in the region would not get any inspiration from what is happening in America.

They don't really look at America as a model for democracy, especially these days because of Trump's election. I think it, in the view of the people, that it undermined the American democratic institutions. And then we had Trump. I don't think that matters would look at America as a source of inspiration when it comes to sharing the president. On the contrary, they see America as an obstacle for democratic changes in the Middle East. Sisi is being supported by the American administrations, autocrats are being supported by American administrations, whether Democrats or even Republicans. So I think what one more time, and this adds to the point that I made earlier, that anti-Americanism also has to do with the support to autocrats in the region.
Jon Alterman:
But I would argue that even when the United States didn't support autocrats, even when the Obama Administration was supportive of an elected government in Egypt and critical of Sisi taking power, the United States was vilified broadly in Egypt. The United States was vilified in the whole world. I think there are to a remarkable degree. It seems to me that U.S. presidents who try to take the side of the people, don’t get the gratitude of the people.

Hassan Barari:
Yeah. Because America is not one issue is like, it’s very complicated, but also by the same token, Jon, when Obama supported the NATO intervention in Libya, America became popular in the Middle East. Suddenly you see articles and newspapers; you see people commenting on TV talking nicely about the role of the United States. Because it helps the Libyan people to, to get rid of the dictators. But then again, when Bashar bombed his own people with chemical weapons in 2013, and they crossed Obama’s redlines and I think that was the game changer. So, it was a point when people say, "Oh, Obama was not really genuine when he talks about supporting people." Obama, he hesitated. And that's why he enabled the Russians to come in. He set the stage for the Russian intervention, which is a bad one in the Middle East, especially in Syria.

I think Obama was judged toward the end of his term, in a negative way, simply because of what he did not do, not because of what he did. Now, Trump is being judged because of what he did in the Middle East. And I think this is the difference. And I hear Jon, I agree with you. It's not about supporting this or that autocrat. America is has not having, I would say, a favorable standing in the public opinion because of many issues from '60s, '70s until today. It's not only autocratic. This is one part of the story.

Jon Alterman:
Hassan Barari. We will together look forward to the results of the U.S. election and what it means for U.S. foreign policy. Thank you so much for joining us.

Hassan Barari:
Thanks, Jon, for having me.