

YOUNG JORDANIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE U.S. GEOPOLITICAL PRESENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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Abstract

On June 4th, 2009 President Barack Obama spoke in Cairo, Egypt on the tension that exists between the United States and the Muslim world. His speech was entitled the "New Beginning," and was meant to repair what he presented as a damaged relationship between the U.S. and Muslim-majority states. The President's speech appeared to be well received by the audience in Cairo, but a long-term reaction throughout the region was unclear. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, with borders touching Iraq, Israel and the Palestinian territories, is heavily influenced by the political, economic and cultural presence of the US. In an attempt to understand how young Jordanians perceive the U.S. geopolitical presence in their society, university students in Amman, Jordan were asked to participate in focus group discussions. This research revealed how the participants viewed U.S. geopolitics as lacking credibility, legitimacy and trustworthiness, and also emphasized the region as commonly stereotyped as a landscape of threat and inferiority. Participants also perceived Americanization as a threat to Jordanian culture. Furthermore, their concerns were often explained through conspiracy theories. However, the young Jordanians distinguished criticisms of the U.S. government and its geopolitics from their sympathies with the American people. Such grounded perspectives are underemphasized in international relations, geopolitics and political geography scholarship. These "voices" also address policy-makers' need for information on how the U.S. is perceived in the Middle East.