

Beeldvormingen over het Westen in post-Mubarak Egypte

English summary



 UNIVERSITEIT VAN AMSTERDAM

Amsterdam Centre for Middle Eastern Studies

Robbert Woltering
Josephine van den Bent
Lidwien van de Wijngaert

Summary

This research project was commissioned by the Research and Documentation Centre (Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum; WODC), at the request of the Office of the National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (Nationaal Coördinator Terrorismebestrijding en Veiligheid; NCTV). This request was made following the developments in the Middle East since December 2010, when Tunisia witnessed the first of a series of uprisings in the region that has since been dubbed the 'Arab Spring'. These developments do not only affect the Middle East itself, but also influence relations between the countries concerned and European states, including the Netherlands. In part, these relations are transparent, for instance where diplomatic and trade relations are concerned. However, there are other relations involved that are not as readily surveyed, such as mutual perceptions, i.e. representations. It is of importance to have a thorough understanding of the way in which Europe – and in a wider sense, the West – is perceived and understood by different populations and groups within the Arab world. In the interest of security, a special concern for an up to date and profound understanding of *hostile* representations of the Western world – of which the Netherlands is part – is legitimate.

The need for intelligence regarding this topic is readily explained. The manner in which the West is depicted in the Arab world has been the subject of constant attention on the part of the NCTV. A markedly negative perception of the West, expressing an aversion to it, may gain a protracted foothold in society, thus contributing to the emergence or perpetuation of anti-Western sentiments. Any alterations in the existence of such sentiments may have implications for the assessment of terrorist threats and counter-terrorism measures. For this reason, the NCTV will benefit from gaining an insight into any possible alterations, be it radicalisation or moderation, in enemy stereotypes of the West. The present research

aims at offering said insight and intends to suggest whether or not an adjustment to the threat assessment is in order, based on the data studied here.

Research questions

Consequentially, several questions central to this study are addressed: which perceptions – hostile or not – can be observed in the Egyptian public debate since the fall of President Mubarak; what position do Islamist discourses take therein; has an evident alteration or radicalisation occurred in this position; and, in that event, what would be the consequences for the safety of Dutch citizens and Dutch interests abroad (in this case, in Egypt)?

Sources and methodology

Although the first steps towards the Arab Spring were taken in Tunisia, most attention has been focused on the developments in Egypt since January 2011. This is understandable, given the central role played by Egypt in the region, both historically and presently. For this reason, it is justifiable to confine a study of representations of the West in the Arab world since the Arab Spring to Egypt. This does not necessarily entail that such representations elsewhere in the Arab world will conform to those disseminated in Egypt. However, it does signify that if a choice for a particular country must be made, Egypt is the most logical option. Additionally, there is the understandable decision to pay particular attention to Islamist groups, which have traditionally fostered a discourse in which the West is portrayed as a cultural, religious and political adversary.

In order to research Egyptian, and particularly Egyptian Islamist, perceptions of the West, this study utilises a collection of different sources: newspapers, books and pamphlets, websites, and social media (Facebook and Twitter). We have come to this selection on the basis of various criteria, namely verifiability, scope, influence on public opinion, and the feasibility of systematically analysing these sources.

We have studied the social media by following a selection of Facebook and Twitter accounts for a period of one month. Collectively, these accounts provided a good impression of the Egyptian public sphere. From these accounts, we gathered all content relating to the West. This content was subsequently quantitatively analysed, and, moreover, a thorough qualitative analysis was performed. What was most striking in these results, was the intense polarisation between Muslim Brotherhood supporters on the one hand, and proponents of the 3 July coup on the other. These groups are continuously accusing one another of consorting with America, Israel, or the West in general, while their own group is presented as an enemy of these very entities.

In addition to that, various newspapers have been collected over the course of several weeks: the state-run *Al-Ahrām*, multiple liberal newspapers, and a collection of Islamist publications of various colours. These were then studied for images of the West; a process in which particular attention has been paid to newspapers of an Islamist nature. The results that emerged showed that *Al-Ahrām*'s coverage of the West is almost exclusively of a negative nature, while the liberal papers show a more two-sided discourse. Regarding the Islamist publications, a marked difference was found between the Muslim Brotherhood publication *Al-Ḥurriyya wa l-'Adāla* on the one hand, and the other Islamist papers – *Al-Liwā' al-Islāmī*, *Al-Sha'b*, and *Al-Raḥma* – on the other. In the period researched, *Al-Ḥurriyya wa l-'Adāla* discussed the West exclusively as a political entity, never as a cultural and religious Other. At the same time, the newspaper displayed a strong need for Western recognition of its problems. By contrast, the other Islamist newspapers did portray the West as a challenger of Islam and Egypt, thereby placing it in the position of a cultural and religious Other.

Furthermore, we analysed a number of websites. First, representations of the West on both the English- and Arabic-language site of the Muslim Brotherhood were compared. Although there were differences in choice of subject matter (the English-language site is predominantly aimed at a foreign audience, broadcasting the message that there is no need to fear the organisation), we did not find a 'double

discourse' in which conflicting messages about the West are being sent. Second, the websites of the newspapers Al-Ḥurriyya wa l-'Adāla and Al-Sha'b have been studied. These papers were banned shortly after we commenced our study, and we were therefore unable to compile and analyse them for a second period. The results from the websites' analysis were comparable to the earlier outcomes of the newspapers' analysis.

Conclusions and limitations

Previous research (Woltering 2011) on representations of the West in Egypt revealed a number of distinctive discourses. The leftist-nationalist discourse primarily defined the West in imperialist terms: the West wishes to dominate Egypt and the Arab world and intends to profit economically from the region's resources. The liberal discourse was characterised by a dual attitude towards the West. On the one hand, it commends the political and individual liberties in Western society, on the other hand it criticises Western (and especially American) foreign policy in the region. The Islamist discourse, lastly, was most hostile in its characterisation of the West, customarily defining the West as a threat to Islam. This study confirmed the findings above: Islamist publications – barring the Muslim Brotherhood newspaper and site – regularly depict the West as a cultural and religious Other. Moreover, this is the group that employs unspecific terms as 'the West' relatively often, in lieu of more precise terms denoting particular countries or regions. The liberal discourse was likewise comparable to previous conclusions. Western foreign policy, particularly American, is severely criticised, but at the same time liberal ideals are applauded. The leftist-nationalist discourse has not been as prominent in this study, but certain elements – colonialism, Western dominance – did clearly emerge from the leftist-Islamist publication Al-Sha'b.

All discourses have in common that they rebuke the West for its hypocrisy. America, the European Union, or the West as an abstract entity, is depicted as an entity adorning itself with appealing ideals as democracy, human rights, and freedom. In practice, however, when it comes to policies concerning the Middle East (or, more

specifically, Egypt), these ideals are blatantly disregarded. The ideals themselves, however, appear to be largely shared: they trigger little discussion. Moreover, the West – in whatever shape or form – is a party whose support is desired. These representations of the West, in which it is both hypocritical and desired (perhaps even required), are neither new nor particular to Egypt.

Since Mubarak's abdication, consecutive electoral successes on the part of the Muslim Brotherhood have gradually created a situation in which there are two dominant sides to the public debate: the Muslim Brotherhood constitutes one faction, their opponents the competing one. Up until the 3 July coup, the Egyptian press was relatively free, but the military takeover was rapidly followed by its demise. The public debate has been dominated by those in support of the coup ('the second revolution') and those continuing to emphasise President Morsi's legitimacy ever since. A striking element herein is that both parties to the conflict accuse the other of being a pawn of the West in an attempt to discredit the opposition. In this rhetorical struggle, the West is accused of wanting to dominate and weaken Egypt. As such, the West has been a stereotypical adversary in the public debate since the fall of Morsi (more so than after the overthrow of Mubarak). This study shows, however, that the West is predominantly a discursive instrument in this rhetoric, used by both parties to underline their own nationalism and authenticity. At the same time, all contending parties seek the support of the powerful Western capitals, Washington in particular. Although the West, in its many different manifestations, is a common presence in the Egyptian public debate, we find that the accusations voiced are not directed to the West so much as to domestic political opponents. These are vilified by portraying them as accomplices of the West. Consequently, Occidentalism for the most part does not actually concern the West (the aim is not to inform about the West), but is a manifestation of internal political struggle and public debate in which Egyptian nationalism is the dominant rhetoric.

In spite of the sudden and complete loss of power the Muslim Brotherhood suffered in July 2013, no indications of institutional radicalisation of this organisation were

discovered in the course of this study. That does not imply, however, that none of its (prominent) members has made statements that could be classified as such. Nonetheless, our analysis of the extensive collection of source material that was available to us allows us to determine that the Muslim Brotherhood's discourse, at this point in time, is not characterised by hostile representations of the West, whether as a culture or as a civilisation. Neither did we find radicalisation in representations of the West in the rhetoric employed by the other Islamist organisations covered in our study.

This study does have its limitations, which must be taken into account when discussing these conclusions. First of all, the study has been limited to Egypt. Although Egypt occupies an important position within the Arab world, differences between countries in the region are vast. Besides, the timeframe in which the research was conducted was relatively short; a timeframe that was dominated by the exceptional aftermath of the 3 July, besides. Lastly, the possibility exists that extremely radical organisations – in so far as these exist – do not use the public sources analysed here in order to spread their message. Although such reluctance to use public sources drastically reduces growth opportunities and social relevance for these organisations, it does not preclude their existence.

As yet, there is no radicalisation of the enemy image of the West in Egyptian Islamist discourse that could have implications for the safety of Dutch citizens and interests in Egypt, as far as we can conclude on the basis of this study. That, however, does not detract from the fact that a continuation of current enemy images may be cause for concern, nor that there are factors in Egyptian politics and society other than representations of the West that are relevant in formulating the appropriate threat assessment.