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DANIEL W. DREZNER

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Are Pop Tarts bad for America?

Posted By [Daniel W. Drezner](#) ■ Wednesday, March 31, 2010 - 12:49 PM ■ [Share](#)



Yesterday I received a lot of queries about [this Bret Stephens op-ed in the Wall Street Journal](#).



ABOUT THIS BLOG

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Daniel W. Drezner is professor of international politics at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.



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Pop quiz—What does more to galvanize radical anti-American sentiment in the Muslim world: (a) Israeli settlements on the West Bank; or (b) a Lady Gaga music video?

If your answer is (b) it means you probably have a grasp of the historical roots of modern jihadism. If, however, you answered (a), then congratulations: You are perfectly in synch with the new Beltway conventional wisdom....

There may well be good reasons for Israel to dismantle [the settlements], assuming that such an act is met with reciprocal and credible Palestinian commitments to suppress terrorism and religious incitement, and accept Israel's legitimacy as a Jewish state. But to imagine that the settlements account for even a fraction of the rage that has inhabited the radical Muslim mind since the days of [Sayyid] Qutb is fantasy: The settlements are merely the latest politically convenient cover behind which lies a universe of hatred. If the administration's aim is to appease our enemies, it will get more mileage out of banning Lady Gaga than by applying the screws on Israel. It should go without saying that it ought to do neither.

Your humble blogger has long defended [the vital role](#) that [pop tarts](#) could play in U.S. foreign policy, so you think I'd have a long-winded response. Fortunately, I'm lazy, so a couple of other bloggers have tackled this question.

As [Andrew Exum points out](#), Middle Eastern, Hezbollah-supporting pop tarts like [Hayfa Wehbe](#) can throw down with Lady Gaga any day of the week when it comes to provocative music videos. In fact, we will now take a 10-second station identification so every reader can visualize that precise [...foreignpolicy.com/.../are_pop_tarts_...](#)

 Daniel Drezner [dandrezner](#)

throwdown:

[You're reading Daniel W. Drezner at ForeignPolicy.com -- your source for global politics, economics, and salacious pop culture!!--ed.]

Daniel Larison suggests that Stephens is suffering from a wee bit of present-ism:

That must be why America was beset by jihadist attacks since at least 1948. Oh, wait, this never happened? How strange. That might mean that the decadence-as-cause-of-terrorism argument grossly exaggerates the importance of such cultural factors in explaining jihadist violence as a way of distracting us from remediable political grievances. In fact, attacks on Americans and American installations began after we inserted ourselves into the region's conflicts and began establishing a military presence there. Hegemonists can obsess over the writings of Qutb all they want, but it will not change the reality that anti-American jihadist violence did not occur until the misguided 1982-83 intervention in Lebanon. U.S. and Israeli military operations and policies of occupation provoke much broader, more intense resentment among Muslims than any general dissatisfaction with the decadence of Western culture and its deleterious effects on their own societies. The suicide bomber in Khost was radicalized by the treatment of Gaza, not the performances of Lady Gaga. It might suit a certain type of Westerner to associate fanaticism, political violence and strict moralism, but on the whole this is a misunderstanding and a distraction from the real causes of the problem.

The recent Moscow subway bombings are instructive on this point. The bombings are outrageous atrocities for which there is no excuse or justification, but one would have to be a blind fool to say that Chechen grievances, which outside jihadists have been exploiting for the last decade, are based in morally offensive Russian pop culture. It is acceptable for hegemonists to acknowledge this when Russia is the target of terrorist attacks, but when it comes to acknowledging U.S. and allied policies as important contributing factors we are treated instead to these sweeping cultural arguments and close readings of Sayyid Qutb.

And, finally, Cato's Justin Logan goes for the kill shot:

Stephens veers back toward falsifiability by writing that "the core complaint that the Islamists from Waziristan to Tehran to Gaza have lodged against the West" is that we're too sexed-up. This is, of course, not accurate. Bin Laden's 1996 fatwa, after all, was not titled "Declaration of War against the Americans with their Supple Buttocks and Protuberant Breasts." Instead, it was called "[Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places](#)." Or you can take a look at [the second fatwa, released in 1998](#). The three big claims made against us in there were

- 1. Our presence in Saudi Arabia and support for the Saudi government, which he hates;
- 2. Our sanctions regime against Iraq and its alleged effects on Iraqi civilians; and
- 3. Our support for Israel.

There's a lot you can do with this information, up to and including supposing that bin Laden would not be satisfied even if these three conditions were somehow removed. You can also read the actual fatwas and conclude that the Israel stuff was far from the centerpiece of the argument and seemed sort of tacked on at the end for good measure. I actually think both these arguments are good ones. But actually thinking about what's in those texts should cause you to ask *why, of all the grievances he could have lodged, including our reverence for Josephine Baker, did he pick those three issues?*

One last thought. Let's ignore what these other bloggers have said for a moment. Let's temporarily accept Stephens' assumption that Muslims in the Middle East are equally exercised about Israel/Palestine and the decadence of U.S. popular culture. If that's true, from a policy perspective, which issue should the United States prioritize?

If you think about this in terms of American national interests, it's not a close call. Pushing Israel/Palestine forward requires leaning a bit harder on an ally that is actually vulnerable to U.S.

FT on Obama's foreign policy decision-making process -- it's all over the map. I'm both impressed and frightened. <http://bit.ly/9rN9ez>
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Are Pop Tarts bad for America? A blog roundup. <http://bit.ly/b9AKQI>
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Israel's... pressure. Censoring U.S. popular culture would require massive domestic costs. If you were offering the president advice among these policy options, which one would you say yields the greatest gain for the least cost to the United States?

Andrew H. Walker/Getty Images

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BLUE13326
4:22 PM ET
March 31, 2010

Stevens is probably right to

Stevens is probably right to an extent, but so are you. At least if you consider Qutb to be the most important philosophical influence on modern jihadism, which, as far as I know, is a fairly non-controversial point. Also, if you look at bin Laden's fatwa, it is pretty clear it is the work of a revolutionary who's prime interest is the overthrow of the Saudi monarchy, and the Israel issue is simply tacked on as an afterthought. In fact, he goes on and on about the economic problems within the kingdom, blaming us, of course; and on how our decadence and weakness will lead to our downfall.

But, so what? It's not like we are going to change our culture for him or the Qutb jihadists; even if we could. So, why not go for something we can change to take out a recruiting tool.

REPLY

STATSGURU
4:55 PM ET
March 31, 2010

Pop Tarts

I thought this was going to be a food post. Now I'm compelled to watch "Telephone" while eating a pair of Brown Sugar Cinnamon pop tarts.

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A closer look at the "decadent culture"...

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