

PolicyWatch #1614

Polling Saudis and Egyptians: Iran, Jihad, and the Economy

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New data from credible private polls of the Egyptian and the urban Saudi public show strikingly high levels of support -- especially among Saudis -- for tough action against Iran's nuclear program. At the same time, these findings demonstrate clearly that economic concerns, rather than foreign policy or domestic political issues, dominate the popular agenda in both countries.

Background

In late November, a number of organizations conducted public opinion polls in various Arab countries to gauge year-end popular sentiment on topical issues, both foreign and domestic. The findings analyzed here derive from several of these sources. The most detailed were drawn from unique data sets produced by a reputable commercial firm and obtained by Pechter Middle East Polls; they were based on personal interviews among a nationally representative sample of 1,000 Egyptians and a representative sample of 1,000 Saudis in the major cities of Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam/Al-Khobar. Two other sources contributed to the findings: an Egyptian national poll conducted by the al-Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies and published in part on November 30 by the Egyptian newspaper Al-Masry Al-Youm; and from an online poll of 200,000 network users -- 55 percent of whom are in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states -- conducted November 19-23 by YouGov/Siraj for the Doha Debates.

Iran Sanctions: What Saudis Think

In both Saudi Arabia and Egypt, respondents were asked: "If Iran does not accept new limits on its nuclear program, would you approve or disapprove of stronger sanctions against Iran by around the end of this year?" Significantly, a solid majority of Saudis, 57 percent, favored tougher sanctions. Moreover, the percentage "strongly" in favor was twice as high as those strongly opposed (22 percent vs. 11 percent).

Though surprisingly "hawkish," these findings are broadly in line with those from GCC respondents in the online Doha Debates poll. And although that poll did not reflect a representative sample (it was limited to a segment of online users that was 80 percent male), it can be considered roughly indicative of sentiment among an important, attentive public in the Arab Gulf states. The findings show a very high level of concern about Iran's nuclear program: 83 percent of the respondents believe that Tehran is planning to build nuclear weapons despite its claims of peaceful intent, while just over half (53 percent) think Iran would actually use nuclear weapons. Of this latter group, three-fifths believe the target would be Saudi Arabia or another GCC state; one-fifth, Israel.

In contrast, a mere 20 percent of the respondents trust the IAEA to deal with Iran's nuclearization, and only about a third (37 percent) believe that Iranian nuclear weapons would offer the region a "balance of power."

Iran Sanctions: What Egyptians Think

The Egyptian public is significantly less supportive than the Saudis of additional sanctions against Iran's nuclear program: 43 percent in favor, 53 percent opposed. Even so, the level of support for such sanctions is substantial, and higher than that recorded in the handful of other, less comprehensive, surveys on the subject. Only modest variation in this close balance was recorded by the demographics of age, education, occupation, or social class.

These latest findings show only a six-point decline in Egyptian support for sanctions since this question was asked in late June during the post-election crackdown in Iran. The passage of time, fading of media images, and imminence of the stated year-end deadline likely contributed to the minor erosion in Egyptian popular acceptance of new Iranian sanctions. Iran's purported willingness to compromise on the nuclear issue in October and early November, and not yet retracted by poll time, may also have been a contributing factor.

Broader Appeal of al-Qaeda's Message

Both in Egypt and in Saudi Arabia, 75 percent of the public voiced an unfavorable opinion of al-Qaeda; only 20 percent expressed even a "somewhat favorable" view. But when asked to estimate the views of other Muslims, nearly half -- 44 percent in Egypt and 48 percent in Saudi Arabia -- said that "al-Qaeda's message appeals" to them. Nearly as high a percentage (40 percent and 36 percent, respectively) called it "an Islamic duty" to provide "financial support for armed mujahedin fighting in various places around the world."

Once again, the demographic variation in these figures is minimal. These findings indicate that the issue of popular support for radical Islamic groups is still significant, even as approval for al-Qaeda specifically remains at the relatively low levels first recorded after a series of terrorist bombings in Arab countries in 2003-2005.

"It's the Economy!"

Remarkably, none of the issues in the preceding discussion ranked anywhere near the top of popular concerns, either in Saudi Arabia or in Egypt. Asked in an open-ended fashion to pinpoint the most important issue facing their country today, 48 percent of Saudis in that supposedly "oil-rich" society cited economic problems such as inflation (21 percent), unemployment (16 percent), and poverty (11 percent). Corruption was also mentioned frequently (18 percent); curiously, Saudi housewives and women in general were significantly more likely than others to cite corruption as the country's foremost concern. Terrorism ranked far behind, at 7 percent; and no foreign policy issue made the list at all. These rankings barely changed when popular suggestions about their country's "second most important issue" were added to the mix.

The pattern in Egypt is similar. Economic concerns dominate the list: poverty, debt, and poor conditions (22 percent), inflation (15 percent), and unemployment (12 percent). Corruption ranks close behind that group, at 10 percent. By contrast, "stability and security" or "extremism" were cited by just 5 percent of Egyptians as their government's most pressing problem.

Even more surprising is that in response to an open-ended question about "the most positive thing the United States could do" in their region, economic support tied statistically with Arab-Israeli issues for first place among Egyptians (36 percent each) and among Saudis (30 percent and 27 percent). In both countries, again, these priorities change very little when first and second place rankings are combined. Also, in both countries, interesting demographic variations occurred in response to this question: students, housewives, women, and rural Egyptians were somewhat more likely to cite economic or technological support as the most positive action the United States could take.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Taken by itself, the analysis of these data is not sufficient ground for major policy changes, but it should be factored into current discussion of the relevant issues. For example, as Washington prepares a push for tougher sanctions against Iran, it can encourage Arab governments to participate more actively by pointing to the high level of Arab "street" support for this initiative. On the counterterrorism and counterinsurgency fronts, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, or elsewhere, these findings suggest that the United States should be more concerned about Arab funding for groups other than al-Qaeda, which enjoy greater popular sympathy today. And on a more positive note, by offering practical economic partnerships and support, rather than by emphasizing regional political conflicts, the United States now has greater prospects of appealing to Arab publics.

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