



PolicyWatch 2329

New Poll Shows Majority of Saudis, Kuwaitis, Emiratis Reject ISIS, Back Two-State Solution with Israel

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A rare poll conducted last month in three Gulf Cooperation Council states demonstrates decisive rejection of ISIS and a surprisingly high level of popular support for peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- but also substantial minority support for both the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas.

New findings from public opinion polls commissioned by The Washington Institute and conducted in September by a leading local commercial survey firm in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) reveal a very mixed picture of popular attitudes toward regional issues and Islamist organizations. The polls are based on personal interviews with a representative national geographic probability sample of 1,000 respondents in each country, yielding a statistical margin of error of plus or minus approximately 3 percent. Only citizens of each country are included; foreign workers, who outnumber natives by two to one in Kuwait and four to one in the UAE, are excluded from the samples.

ISIS Has Almost No Popular Support in Three Gulf Arab States

[As previously reported](#), a mere 5 percent of Saudis -- and even fewer Kuwaitis or Emiratis, based on these new survey results -- voice a favorable view of the Islamic extremist movement known as the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), which renamed itself the Islamic State (IS) earlier this year. This is a much lower figure, by an order of magnitude, than suggested in some sensational anecdotal reports -- including one alarming but completely unscientific "poll" headlined in the pan-Arab press early last summer. It suggests, quite contrary to common misconception, that the new anti-ISIS coalition spearheaded by the United States is on solid ground, at least in terms of public opinion in the Arab Gulf. Of course, even a tiny minority of vocal or violent ISIS supporters could create serious problems in any of these (or other) countries.

But Muslim Brotherhood Still Attracts a Surprisingly Large Minority

By contrast, however, the Muslim Brotherhood is rated positively by around one-third in each country: 31 percent of Saudis, 34 percent of Kuwaitis, and 29 percent of Emiratis. This level of popular approval is considerably higher than might be expected, given that both the Saudi and Emirati governments labeled the Brotherhood a "terrorist organization" earlier this year and have very publicly campaigned against it.

The unanticipated extent of continued grassroots support for the Muslim Brotherhood, an opposition Islamic movement, helps explain why these governments are so troubled by it, and why they

continue to campaign so strenuously against it. It also helps explain why they back the current Egyptian government so strongly -- and why they are trying so hard to pressure Qatar into reducing its support for the international Brotherhood. And it helps explain the divergent paths these fractious Gulf Cooperation Council states are taking in their separate efforts to support the Syrian opposition.

Hamas and Its Backers Get Very Mixed Reviews

Moreover, compared to the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, its Palestinian offshoot, scores even higher approval: 52 percent of Saudis, 53 percent of Kuwaitis, and 44 percent of Emiratis. (By comparison, the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah scores somewhat lower, at approximately 40 percent in all three countries polled). But given a choice of lessons from the summer's war in Gaza, fewer than half in each country say that Hamas military tactics are likely to defeat Israel decisively in the future. Moreover, a very substantial minority in each country -- 40-45 percent -- agrees that "Hamas brings more harm than good to the Palestinians themselves."

These mixed public attitudes are reflected in views about various regional powers. Kuwaitis are almost evenly divided in positive or negative appraisals of the Egyptian government's recent policies -- which oppose both the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas; and they are similarly divided about the governments of Turkey and Qatar, which support both organizations. Emiratis have equally divided opinions about Turkey and Qatar but are more favorably disposed toward Egypt: 60 percent positive versus 37 percent negative. Saudis are split on Turkey, narrowly negative on Qatar (45 percent vs. 53 percent), and the most favorable, by a two-to-one margin, toward Egypt: 64 percent positive versus 33 percent negative.

Palestinian Cause Remains Popular -- But So Does Peace with Israel

Significantly, looking ahead, a majority in all three of these Gulf Arab societies say that "the best way forward is peace between Israel and a Palestinian state." The figures range from a bare majority of 53 percent in Kuwait, to 58 percent in the UAE, to a striking 61 percent in Saudi Arabia. And around one-third of the public in each country "strongly" agrees with that statement.

Yet equally striking is that even larger majorities, in each country, *disagree* with the notion that "Arab countries should pay more attention to their own internal issues than to the Palestinians." The proportions who reject that assertion range from 60 percent of Kuwaitis, to 63 percent of Emiratis, to 65 percent of Saudis. Clearly, the Palestinian cause remains a very evocative issue for many Arabs, even in the distant Gulf societies currently facing many other regional challenges.

This enduring empathy almost certainly helps explain the relatively high Hamas ratings in each of the countries represented in this survey. Significantly, however, support for the Palestinians does not extend proportionately to Hezbollah, which claims to be acting on their behalf. Moreover, wide popular sympathy for the Palestinian cause does not extend at all to ISIS, which claims the mantle of an Islamic (but exclusively Sunni) "resistance" movement.

Syria, Iran, Hezbollah All Rate Very Poorly

A different point of even stronger consensus among these publics is a negative view of both the Syrian and Iranian governments. Syrian president Bashar al-Assad's regime gets lower than 15 percent approval in all three countries polled. Attitudes toward Tehran are somewhat more nuanced. Among Saudis, just 13 percent voice a positive view of Iran's government. But in the UAE, which has better business and other ties to Iran, this figure rises to 21 percent. And in Kuwait, where roughly 30 percent of citizens are Shiite Muslims, Iran's approval rating stands at 24 percent.

Attitudes toward Hezbollah, the armed Lebanese Shiite movement closely tied to the regimes in Syria and Iran, track closely with views of those two countries. A mere 13 percent of Saudis say they have even a "fairly positive" opinion of Hezbollah. That proportion is almost the same among Emiratis, at 15 percent. But in Kuwait, favorable appraisals of Hezbollah climb somewhat, to 24 percent.

Yet Popular Approval of the United States Is Equally Low

In these three Gulf Arab societies, the United States fares no better than Syria, Iran, or Hezbollah in terms of popular attitudes. The proportions voicing even a "fairly positive" opinion of the United States, "considering its recent policies," are 12 percent among Saudis, 14 percent among Kuwaitis, and 18 percent among Emiratis. Conversely, a large minority in each place expresses a "very negative" view of the United States: 47 percent in Saudi Arabia, 45 percent in Kuwait, and 38 percent in the UAE. To put these figures in perspective, the comparable approval rating for China is around 40 percent in all three countries; and its average "very negative" rating, perhaps stemming from China's repressive policies toward its Muslim minority, is around 20 percent.

Policy Implications

The implications of these polls for U.S. policy are mixed. Public opinion does not determine government behavior in any of these monarchies, yet it probably has some limiting effects. From that standpoint, the remarkably low levels of popular support for ISIS are clearly a plus -- even if positive attitudes toward the United States are not much higher. The unexpectedly robust grassroots acceptance of peace between Israel and a Palestinian state is also an encouraging signal, potentially useful for balancing different U.S. interests and allies in the region. At the same time, however, the surprisingly widespread sympathy for the Muslim Brotherhood, and for Hamas, provides a cautionary note regarding the overall foreign policy orientation, and perhaps even the long-term political stability, of these societies.

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