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New Saudi Poll: Corruption a Major Concern, Divisions on Reforms and U.S. Ties

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Brief Analysis

In the wake of the Khashoggi scandal, a rare new public opinion poll in Saudi Arabia shows wide popular concern about corruption and a number of other internal problems. At the same time, the survey data demonstrates only minority support for the official initiative of Islamic reform. Ironically, then, this prime locus of support on the part of outside powers for Saudi policy shifts is also precisely the area of greatest internal debate.

In contrast, outside criticism of Saudi Arabia's positions on foreign policy issues appears to have relatively little popular resonance inside the kingdom. This applies particularly to its animosity toward Iran, and also apparently to its interventions in Yemen and Lebanon as well as its tendency to resist American counsel. Peacemaking with Israel is also broadly accepted, at least as a long-term direction for policy. In general, the Saudi public is more unified behind the general outlines of its government's foreign posture than on its domestic agenda.

Looking more closely at individual questions, Riyadh's margin for maneuver in terms of internal public opinion varies considerably from one issue to the next. The data reveals no single issue on which the public is massively against the government. However, the same data does point to some signs of unease below the surface.

Especially significant in light of a highly publicized official "anti-corruption" campaign, a solid majority of Saudi respondents (63%) say their government is still doing "too little" in "reducing the level of corruption in our economic and political life." This is the clearest indicator of popular dissatisfaction—though it is hard to know if this signifies desire for an even harsher crackdown by the rulers, or a cleansing of their own house. One clue is that a plurality (41%) also think Saudi officials are not doing enough in "sharing the burden of taxes and other obligations to the government in a fair manner."

Moreover, a narrow plurality (36%) say the government is doing too little in "protecting the freedoms and privacy of

individual citizens,” perhaps with the Khashoggi affair in mind. The remainder are sharply divided on this question: 32% say the government does “about the right amount” to protect individual rights, while 28% actually say it is doing “too much,” possibly out of concern over insufficient enforcement of Islamic and other social taboos. Taken together, these mixed views explain why the large majority (79%) of respondents agree—albeit probably for different reasons—that “right now, internal political and economic reform is more important for our country than any foreign policy issue.”

But what kind of reform? Here Saudi popular attitudes are also deeply divided. One-quarter, unchanged [from a year ago](#), say that “we should listen to those among us who are trying to interpret Islam in a more moderate, tolerant, and modern direction.” But three-quarters disagree, including 39% who do so “strongly.”

The picture seems brighter when it comes to “promoting equality and opportunity for women.” One-quarter of respondents think their government is doing “too little,” half say “about the right amount,” and only one-quarter say the kingdom is now doing “too much” in that regard. On this issue, the government seems to have aligned well with the general thrust of public opinion.

More troubling for the palace is that a remarkable one-quarter of respondents, the same proportion as last year, remain willing to voice some sympathy for the Muslim Brotherhood. These results parallel [the latest findings](#) from our Egyptian surveys. The findings are all the more noteworthy given that for the past several years, the Brotherhood has been banned as a terrorist organization and is routinely vilified by official and semiofficial media in both these major Arab countries.

In foreign policy, however, the Saudi public seems more clearly aligned with its government on several key issues: hostility toward Iran, Hezbollah, and the Houthis in Yemen, and acceptance in principle of peacemaking with Israel. Regarding Iran, a mere 11% consider it even “somewhat important” to have good relations with that neighbor across the Gulf. Similarly, Iran’s client Hezbollah gets negative ratings from fully 90% of Saudi respondents, including 71% with a “very negative” view. And Yemen’s Houthis, against whom the kingdom continues to wage a bloody war, are rated unfavorably by 93%—including two-thirds who voice a highly negative view.

On the once-controversial question of peace with Israel, Saudi public opinion has likewise evolved more or less in tandem with official policy. Indeed, the whole issue has receded in terms of popular priorities. Only 20% pick “push harder to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict” as their top priority for U.S. policy in the region. Rather, pride of place now goes to two other objectives: “increase practical opposition to Iran’s regional influence and activities” and “do more to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis in Yemen.”

Yet when the focus is on the Arab-Israeli issue, Saudis now echo the relatively moderate official line. As was the case in our 2017 survey, two-thirds of respondents agree that “Arab states should play a new role in Palestinian-Israeli peace talks, offering both sides incentives to take more moderate positions.” In advance of a peace agreement, however, a much lower proportion—just 20%—believe that “Arab states should work with Israel on other issues like technology, counterterrorism, and containing Iran.” And just 28% now have even a “somewhat positive” attitude toward Hamas, which rejects peace with Israel.

More surprising are the blasé Saudi attitudes toward the United States. Only a minority consider good ties with Washington even “somewhat important” for their country—almost exactly the proportion who see relations with Russia or Iraq in the same light. President Trump gets favorable reviews from a mere 9% of respondents—precisely the same as Russia’s President Putin, and well below the 25-30% approval ratings for China’s President Xi and President Erdogan of Turkey, another one of Saudi Arabia’s regional rivals. On the positive side, however, only 12% would prefer the United States to simply “reduce its interference in the region.”

METHODOLOGY

These findings are from a commercial survey conducted by a reputable regional firm in November 2018, involving private, face-to-face personal interviews by local professionals among a representative national sample of 1,000 Saudi citizens. Respondents were assured anonymity, and no interference or intimidation was reported, though a small proportion of the random contacts refused to participate. Sampling was done using standard geographic probability techniques, yielding a statistical margin of error of approximately 3%. ❖



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