

# Unique Saudi Poll Shows Moderate Majority, But Sectarian Split

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Oct 3, 2017

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Brief Analysis



October 03, 2017

The startling news that Saudi Arabia plans to let women drive aroused surprisingly mixed reactions among key kingdom-watchers. There is general satisfaction that Riyadh is really reforming at long last, but also some apprehension about a possible reactionary backlash. This points to a larger issue that is at once fundamental and fundamentalist: is Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman too moderate to last?

Until now, answers to this question have relied solely on guesses about Saudi popular attitudes. But now a rare new public opinion poll demonstrates a remarkable level of support for such moderate positions. At the same time, this unique data set provides the first hard evidence of some continuing internal social divisions that bear careful watching, as the crown prince navigates these delicate cross-pressures among his subjects.

Specifically, the poll shows that on the basic question of fundamentalism vs. reform, half the Saudi public line up on different sides. A quarter still privately support the Muslim Brotherhood, even though their government has labeled it a terrorist organization. In contrast, a quarter of Saudi adults say it is “a good idea” to “listen to those among us who are trying to interpret Islam in a more modern, tolerant, and moderate direction.”

That leaves the other half of the Saudi public somewhere in the middle -- and probably inclined to give their leaders the benefit of doubt in determining public policy on such controversial religious matters. These findings suggest that Riyadh can count on some significant grass-roots backing for its social reforms, and considerable leeway from the public at large to define this new direction. Nevertheless, hard line fundamentalists also retain a hold on a substantial minority of Saudis, making this transition unavoidably slow, and almost certainly a bit bumpy.

Why should Americans care about Saudi public opinion? Not because this key Mideast ally, literally a Mecca for all the world's 1.7 billion Muslims, and the largest global oil exporter by far, is a democracy -- which it most decidedly is not. Rather, even an absolute monarchy like Saudi Arabia must pay some attention to the public mood on the most salient subjects, simply in order to survive.

These results indicate that Saudi public opinion today is roughly in tune with its government on certain hot issues. Moreover, other findings reveal that Saudis are also roughly in tune with American foreign policy priorities. And that is an important and surprisingly encouraging augury, both of internal stability and of smooth partnership with Washington. Conversely, on the issues noted below about which Saudi public opinion is much more mixed, both Washington and Riyadh need to heed those warning signs, and perhaps rethink their policies accordingly.

The poll was conducted last month by an Arab commercial market research company, using face-to-face interviews with a random, representative national sample of 1,000 Saudi citizens. And unlike most other such polls, this one was not an officially sponsored, government-monitored, opposition-oriented, or self-selected sampling. As a result, the findings are highly credible, accurately reflecting “Arab street” as well as Saudi elite opinion.

Asked to pick their top priority for U.S. policy, Saudis put “increase its practical opposition to Iran’s regional influence and activities” in first place, with 27 percent. Next comes “expand its active role in fighting against Daesh, Al-Qaidah, and similar terrorist groups,” with 24 percent. Close behind is “do more to find a diplomatic solution to the crisis in Yemen.” Only in fourth place, with 16 percent, comes “push harder to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.” Significantly, too, even fewer (11 percent) say the U.S. should simply “reduce its interference in the region.” Moreover, a remarkably solid majority of the Saudi public approves a key new element in U.S. policy: 68 percent say “Arab states should play a new role in Palestinian-Israeli peace talks, offering both sides incentives to take more moderate positions.”

None of this means that the Saudi public likes U.S. policies overall. In fact, just 20 percent voice a positive view on that general point. Yet twice as many say it is “important for our country to have good relations” with the United States. And the same proportion also agree that in the current crisis with Qatar, “Arab countries need help from outside powers like the U.S. in order to overcome their differences.”

On that hot regional dispute, three-quarters of Saudis agree on three things: one, “the best outcome is a compromise”; two, the goal is “the maximum degree of Arab cooperation against Iran”; and three, Al-Jazeera TV is bad. But Saudis are surprisingly divided, despite their government’s hard line against Qatar, on two other relevant points. They split down the middle on whether to keep boycotting Qatar. And they split down the middle on whether or not “each Arab country has every right to decide for itself.”

In this connection, this survey is also unique in offering hard data about Saudi sectarian differences. The country’s citizens are approximately 90 percent Sunni Muslim, but also include a 10 percent Shia Muslim minority. On a few issues, a surprising consensus emerges. Saudis of both sects generally agree that “right now, internal political and economic reform is more important for our country than any foreign policy issue.” And three-quarters of both groups say that “Arabs should work harder on behalf of coexistence and cooperation between Sunnis and Shia.” On these questions, the Saudi public presents a picture of consensual sects.

On some other important issues, however, a deep sectarian divide clearly emerges. Asked about Iran’s recent policies, a mere three percent of Saudi Sunnis express a favorable opinion – as against 46 percent of Saudi Shia. This sharp divergence extends to Iran’s Lebanese Shia proxy, Hezbollah. Fifty-seven percent of Saudi Shia, compared with just 4 percent of Sunnis, have a positive view of that movement.

Altogether, this highly unusual data set strongly suggests that both the U.S. and Saudi governments are on unexpectedly solid ground in seeking greater cooperation against jihadi terrorists, against Iran, and in favor of some broader regional framework on Israeli-Palestinian issues. At the same time, the grass-roots Saudi divisions on some intra-Arab, Islamic, and sectarian issues show where Saudi or American policy adjustments may be necessary.

David Pollock is the Kaufman Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues. ❖

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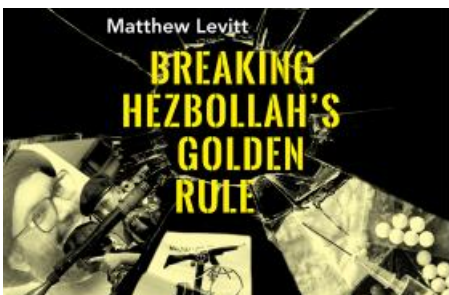
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