

# Discussing Recent Poll Results from the Middle East

by [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

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**An Egyptian analyst and a Washington Institute expert discuss the results and implications of the latest Institute polls conducted in the region, touching on the Syria war, Iran, perceptions of U.S. policy, and other pressing issues.**

## SYRIA

**Ramy Aziz:** The poll results indicate a high percentage of negative views toward the Assad regime among Arab peoples. How do you see the significance of these high rates for the course of events in Syria?

**David Pollock:** It is true, as your question points out, that Arab public opinion -- whether in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, or most other places -- is very negative toward the Assad regime in Damascus. That does make it easier for several Arab governments to give some political and practical support to the Syrian opposition, and to work with the U.S. and other anti-Assad countries on this issue. It also helps isolate Assad's regime in much of the region.

But this does not mean that any Arab government, at least so far, is willing to intervene directly in Syria against that regime. Public opinion generally does not support that kind of intervention -- and in any case these governments are not real democracies that would face sufficient pressure to follow public opinion, even if their publics did want that kind of policy change. At the same time, general Arab disapproval also makes Assad even more dependent on Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah for support against the majority of his own people.

**Aziz:** But after the recent terrorist events that have taken place in Paris, what is your take on the impact of those events on the Assad regime, and whether these events have become the biggest motivation to take decisive action against Assad and his regime, which has become one of the major causes of the spread of terrorism in the world?

**Pollock:** As for the impact on Syria of the recent terrible terrorist incidents in Paris and elsewhere, it seems they have strengthened international and Arab determination to fight against Daesh. However, this could actually work in Assad's favor, because some people argue that he and his forces can be part of the anti-Daesh coalition -- or at least that the fight against Daesh should be a higher priority than the overthrow of Assad's regime. I know, as you say, that

others see Assad's brutality and oppression as the underlying cause of Daesh and other terrorism. Yet I think that, for the time being, the winning argument is that he should be allowed to remain in power while the fight against Daesh takes top priority.

## IRAN

**Aziz:** What is the explanation for the negative views that survey respondents in the region expressed toward Iran?

**Pollock:** The overall negative Arab popular attitudes toward Iran are indeed very striking now. I interpret this as reflecting a combination of geopolitical but also sectarian and ethnic rivalry -- in Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and in the region as a whole. Moreover, as you say, the prevailing expectations are that these relations will not improve in the foreseeable future. The practical implication is that most Arab governments can feel comfortable resisting Iranian pressure or promises, and working to reinforce their military and internal security defenses against Iranian aggression or subversion.

But Arab countries still understand that they must learn to live with their powerful Iranian neighbor. I think they will try hard to avoid provoking a direct confrontation with Tehran. And there is also little popular support for cooperating with Israel against Iran, so that is unlikely to become a major new factor -- certainly not in the public domain.

**Aziz:** How do you explain the variation in views toward Iran on the one hand, and toward the nuclear deal on the other? Despite the sharp negative views of Iran, the deal is viewed positively to some extent.

**Pollock:** When it comes to the nuclear deal with Iran, you correctly note that Arab popular views are more mixed. I think this is because quite a few Arabs believe that even if Iran remains hostile, the nuclear deal at least postpones one very serious threat it could present: a nuclear bomb. What they may not understand, though, is that the deal's lifting of economic sanctions against Iran will make it richer, stronger, and potentially more dangerous, even without a nuclear weapon.

## RUSSIA AND HEZBOLLAH

**Aziz:** What are the implications of the very negative public views toward Russia and Hezbollah?

**Pollock:** These are big questions! I would say that Russia doesn't care very much about Arab public opinion's mostly unfavorable view of Hezbollah, for several reasons. First, Russia's priority now is to support Assad's regime, and Hezbollah is a necessary part of that in a purely military sense. (In fact, I just found out that Russia has been sharing some intelligence with Hezbollah for quite a while, at least since 2006, even before the Syrian civil war.) Second, Putin knows that he is now viewed as an important player even by Arab governments that dislike his policies -- including Saudi Arabia, to cite one key example. Third, some major Arab governments, especially Iraq, but I suspect Egypt as well, actually prefer Assad to Daesh or the Muslim Brotherhood, so they do not oppose Russian policy in Syria. For all these reasons, I conclude that Moscow thinks it is winning more than losing by joining Hezbollah's fight to prop up the Assad regime.

**Aziz:** What is Russia's responsibility for the terrorism that has struck Europe, and for a refugee crisis the likes of which have not seen since World War II? Will the Russian strategy succeed?

**Pollock:** I'm not sure if Russians believe their own propaganda that the terrorism and refugees coming from Syria are the opposition's fault, not Assad's. But their policy is based on the premise that the rest of the world will respond to these threats by accepting Assad as part of the solution, rather than part of the problem, for the time being. And sadly that seems to be succeeding so far.

## THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD AND HAMAS

**Aziz:** The Muslim Brotherhood got a good percentage of positive reviews in these surveys. So do you see any role for the Brotherhood in the near future, specifically in Egypt, but also in the Arab world in general?

**Pollock:** One of the most surprising and important findings in these surveys is that the Muslim Brotherhood still has a very significant level of popular sympathy in several important Arab states -- even where it is officially illegal, as in Egypt (or the UAE, in last year's poll). Not majority support, certainly, but around 25-35%, which is substantial. This shows me, first of all, that the poll results reflect people saying what they really think, not what is "politically correct." Second, it means that the MB will remain an underground force to be reckoned with for a long time. But third, because it is now a "silent minority" in most places, I don't think it will regain a leading political role or threaten the survival of any Arab regime again anytime soon.

**Aziz:** How do you see the efforts and pressures imposed by the king of Saudi Arabia to reintegrate the Muslim Brotherhood in political life as a means of countering the expansionism of Shiite Iran?

**Pollock:** Your question about the new Saudi leadership leaning back toward the MB in order to help contain Iran is also very meaningful. I see the Saudi government as ambivalent about the MB today, torn between Islamic, domestic, anti-Iranian, and other foreign policy imperatives -- particularly support for Sisi in Egypt. My best guess is that the Saudis will as usual try to hedge their bets, perhaps even to broker a rapprochement between the MB and Sisi. That, I think, is impossible, however. So Saudi Arabia will be left with a policy of supporting Islamist groups like the MB in Syria, but probably not elsewhere. They know, as these surveys show, that the MB retains a real measure of support among various Sunni Muslim publics. Yet they also know that it is ultimately a threat to the existing political order, including their own.

**Aziz:** Polls show that Hamas gets a positive evaluation, more than what the PA got. What is your explanation for that?

**Pollock:** As for Hamas, an MB offshoot, the reason for its relative popularity is simple: it is viewed as continuing the fight against Israel, more so than the PA. But it is considerably less popular today than a year or two ago. I think many Arabs have come to realize that Hamas is simply a losing proposition, unable to beat Israel or even to satisfy its own Palestinian subjects. Moreover, many Egyptians rightly see it today as an enemy of stability and a friend of terrorism in their own country. That is why Hamas is losing favor, despite its false claims of effective "resistance" against Israel.

## THE U.S., FRANCE, AND CHINA

**Aziz:** How do you see the increasingly negative regional perceptions toward the United States, even in Saudi Arabia, even though the United States is a strategic partner and most important ally for Riyadh?

**Pollock:** You raise a true and very troubling question about U.S. credibility or reputation in Arab eyes. These numbers don't lie: popular views of U.S. policy are very negative in every Arab country polled, almost as low as in the days of the Bush administration. In those days this was mostly due to anger at the U.S. invasion of Iraq and support for Israel. Obama tried hard to change that image, but failed, for different reasons.

Today, many Arabs are also mad at the U.S. for *not* intervening enough, to stop Assad and Iran -- *and* for intervening too much in Arab internal affairs, as they see it, for example by accepting the previous Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt, or by speaking out for Western models of democracy and human rights. This is the case in all seven Arab publics polled.

**Aziz:** Despite the U.S. liberation of Kuwait in 1991, poll respondents in that country did not express a positive outlook toward U.S. policy commensurate with what has been provided to them. The same goes for Jordan and Egypt, despite the U.S. aid provided to each of them. How can the United States fix that image, which has been severely damaged in

these countries recently?

**Pollock:** As you say, even in Kuwait, which owes its very existence to American military intervention against Saddam 25 years ago. Add to this the pernicious influence of widespread conspiracy theories, which absurdly blame the U.S. for everything bad that happens in the region -- including even Daesh. In a perverse sense, this mindset represents a kind of backhanded, albeit badly mistaken, compliment to perceived American power. But it also creates a huge obstacle to understanding, and a way for some Arabs to avoid taking real responsibility for their own problems.

It is really very difficult for the U.S. to change these perceptions in a lasting way, as Obama discovered to his chagrin. Yet another question, one not asked in these surveys, produces some comfort with a revealing result: The majority of Arabs in these same societies continues to think it is important for their governments to maintain good relations with the U.S., even as they disapprove of U.S. policies. And the objective record shows that U.S. relations with those governments remain strong, as measured in trade, travel, arms deals, and security cooperation.

**Aziz:** Do you believe that other countries such as China, France, and Russia will succeed in filling the vacuum caused by the U.S. withdrawal from the region?

**Pollock:** Yes, at least to some extent. France and Turkey are already setting up military bases in the Gulf. Russia is intervening militarily in Syria, threatening Turkey, and selling advanced weapons all over the region. China is beginning to invest heavily in some key countries, and to flex its diplomatic muscles on a few issues.

And yet two key points must be mentioned in conclusion. One, Arabs are trying much harder than before to address some of their own security issues. Yemen is a prime case in point, even if success is far from certain. And two, for many Arab governments, the U.S. remains the defender of last resort, as well as a significant partner on a wide range of national security, economic, and other issues.

For this reason, some Arabs, governments and people alike, are hoping that the next U.S. president resumes a more active and effective role in the region. If the past is any guide, however, most will probably find reasons to blame the U.S. for whatever troubles or unsolved problems, like the Palestinian one, come next. And they will nevertheless keep looking to the U.S. for help, while hedging their bets with other rising powers -- almost certainly including even Iran. It reminds me of the old Tina Turner song, "What's Love Got to Do With It"!

*David Pollock is the Kaufman Fellow at The Washington Institute and former senior advisor for the Broader Middle East at the State Department. Ramy Aziz is an Egyptian writer and political analyst who runs a blog on the Times of Israel website.* ❖

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