

Saudi Arabia by the Numbers

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Articles & Testimony

The very concept of public opinion in highly secretive Saudi Arabia is almost an oxymoron. Hard data are difficult to come by, and even rarer is information about controversial and strategically critical current issues: views about military action against Iran, corruption and the state of civil liberties within the kingdom, religious extremism and al Qaeda, and donations to other mujahideen. Yet I was able to obtain exactly this kind of data by working with the new Princeton, N.J.-based firm Pechter Middle East Polls and an established regional survey team.

The results are eye-opening. A third of the Saudi public would approve a U.S. military strike against Iran's nuclear program, and a fourth is even willing to say it would support an Israeli operation. A solid majority of Saudis want local elections, which have been postponed for two years. Solid majorities also say that corruption and religious extremism are serious problems in their country. At the same time, 36 percent call it "an Islamic duty" to donate funds to "armed mujahideen fighting in various places around the world," but only about half that percentage voices support for al Qaeda.

Most intriguing of all, however, is that none of these hot-button issues ranks very high on the public's agenda compared with economic concerns. In fact, a majority of urban citizens in this oil-rich country name inflation, unemployment, or poverty as Saudi Arabia's most important national priority.

Gathering the data to draw these conclusions was a unique challenge, but not insurmountable. There are two sets of practical difficulties that limit pollsters working in this conservative and tightly controlled country: political or cultural constraints, and special sampling challenges. Luckily, after 25 years in the field, I have developed a few tricks for gathering information in societies such as these. One very valuable tool, which I pioneered in the region during the 1990-1991 Iraq-Kuwait crisis, is to piggyback some political questions on a commercial product survey -- about cars, shampoo, media audiences, airlines, almost anything. Such surveys are now fairly routine in most Arab countries, and this "double-edged" polling technique has a solid track record. This strategy has the benefit of greatly reducing the odds of interference by local authorities. At the same time, it has the added virtue of putting respondents more at ease with "icebreaker" questions before broaching sensitive social or political issues.

Occasionally the transition from one topic to the next can be a bit awkward, but it works. During the mid-1990s, while I was monitoring a survey in one Arab village, we tacked on a slew of very direct political questions to a long marketing survey about the plastic toy Legos, of all things. One respondent was convinced that there must be some

connection between politics and Legos and persistently asked me to explain how the two topics were related. I'm not sure I was able to persuade him that there really was no link, except the convenience and cost savings of combining the two totally unrelated topics into one survey. Nevertheless, even this interview produced clear, thoughtful, and apparently quite candid responses to all the questions on the form, whether about Legos or politics.

Telephone polls, while temptingly easy to organize, are widely viewed with suspicion in the Middle East. They are therefore distinctly inferior to in-person interviews, especially about anything controversial. Interviewers must be drawn from the area, allowing them to fit easily into society, and also to ensure that only Saudi citizens are sampled, not the millions of Arabic-speaking guest workers -- but not too local, in that they are personally known in the neighborhood. Scrupulously observing gender divisions is also vital: Women interview women; men interview men.

Another common cultural phenomenon is widespread reluctance to admit ignorance, even about obscure or trivial things. So, when asking if respondents are aware of various items or issues, it can be useful to include a completely fictitious term on the list, as a kind of reality check. In this Saudi poll, a remarkable 70 percent of the urban public said it was aware of the country's Majlis al-Shura, a royally appointed, purely advisory council that seldom makes any real news. In retrospect, I wish I had also asked a "control" question to check on the validity of this figure.

In a recent commercial survey in Egypt and Jordan, for example, I asked if certain brand names were American or not -- and I made up a brand called "George's Sportswear" out of thin air and put it on the list along with such real brands as Crest toothpaste, Xerox, and Nescafe. Sure enough, about half of Egyptians and Jordanians voiced an opinion about whether "George's Sportswear" is an American or a non-American brand -- even though it really does not exist at all. I have obtained similar results on such fictitious questions in Israel, too. The useful lesson learned is to take findings on similar questions in these countries with a large grain of salt. I'm not really sure why respondents in the United States and Europe seem more willing to concede that they have never heard of something; but if asked a follow-up question, they will often venture an opinion about it anyway!

Translation issues can also crop up, sometimes with significant implications. For example, in the current Saudi poll, one question originally submitted in English asked about support for "armed mujahideen." This initially came back in Arabic as a softer "Muslim mujahideen" -- a tiny slip of the pen in one Arabic letter, but one that had to be hastily corrected before the questionnaires were printed.

When it comes to the unique challenges of achieving a representative population sample in Saudi Arabia, ideal methods have to be adjusted to local realities. In such a traditional society, and one where opinion polls are so rare, few people chosen at random would invite a total stranger into their house and answer his nosy questions -- and even fewer women would agree to do so. The result is a survey that is admittedly imperfect, but still representative of the major population centers -- and a whole lot better than the guesswork, anecdotes, and stereotypes that often pass for analyses of Saudi public opinion.

The basic method applied in Saudi Arabia is to use "hybrid" samples. To accomplish this, approximately 100 locations are selected at random and distributed according to population size. While an ideal poll would then select households strictly at random, we were forced to survey our respondents based on "referral" (or "snowball sampling"). In each location, one respondent refers the interviewer to another household, which is not interviewed -- this is done so that people cannot "recommend" others they think will give the "right" answers. Instead, someone in the second household refers the interviewer to a third household. That is where the next individual respondent is selected, this time again at random. This is the only practical way in Saudi society for a stranger to (literally) get behind the high household walls to conduct a survey.

In conducting our most recent poll, we doubled the number of interviews to 1,000 -- twice the standard size of many surveys -- to ensure that our sample was representative. As further insurance, we checked the sample's

demographics (gender, age, education, social class, occupation) against statistics for the total population and if necessary adjusted our numbers. Those statistics must be gleaned from hundreds of previous surveys because Saudi Arabia does not publish detailed census data.

In addition, for logistical and other practical reasons, this sample is an urban rather than a national one. It was taken in the three major metropolitan areas of Jeddah, Riyadh, and Dammam/al-Khobar, which span the country's western, central, and eastern regions. This means that some fairly large urban areas were left out, including the Sunni fundamentalist strongholds in Mecca and Medina in the west and al-Qasim in the center. Also not sampled was the Shiite concentration in al-Qatif and its vicinity in the east, whose relations with the dominant Sunni majority are not always smooth. What we have here, then, is a survey of "major metro" Saudi public opinion.

How much does any of this really matter, given that Saudi Arabia is hardly a democracy where public opinion can oust the government or even directly influence public policy? The fact is that many autocratic Arab governments are nevertheless concerned, to varying degrees, about popular attitudes in their societies. Some, like Egypt and Jordan, actually maintain very competent official pollsters for this very reason.

One recent illustration: In late November 2009, in the context of rising Arab-Iranian tensions, this poll showed that most Saudis and Egyptians did not want their governments to offer satellite time to Al-Alam, Iran's Arabic-language TV channel. By January of this year, Al-Alam was ordered off the air on Egypt's Nilesat and Saudi Arabia's Arabsat broadcasts. This was probably not entirely a coincidence.

But when it comes to critical issues of their own internal or external security, Arab governments tend to override public opinion as necessary. Over the past decade, most of these governments have quietly kept close ties with the United States, even when polls proved the Iraq war had turned popular sentiment in a sharply anti-American direction. The Saudi government has so far shown little appetite for a serious crackdown on corruption, even though polls show most of the public sees it as a serious problem. Egypt and Jordan have adopted tough postures toward Hamas, despite polls indicating that the group remains popular (though less than before) in those countries.

Most Arab governments, in other words, are constantly juggling prudence and popularity. When the choice is unavoidable and clear-cut, prudence usually wins. The precise policy outcome, however, is often some messy mixture of these two imperatives -- for example, discreet cooperation with Washington, hiding behind stridently anti-American official and semiofficial media. Analyzing public opinion, even in these autocracies, is the first step in figuring out how decisive, or how messy, Arab policy decisions are likely to be.

David Pollock is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the political dynamics of Middle Eastern countries. He is the author of the Institute's 2008 Policy Focus [Slippery Polls: Uses and Abuses of Opinion Surveys from Arab States. \(/templateC04.php?CID=290\)](#) ❖

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