

Saudi Public Backs Iran Sanctions but Split on Military Action

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Jan 12, 2010

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Brief Analysis

A highly unusual and credible private poll of Saudi citizens taken in late November 2009 by a reputable regional firm shows solid popular support for tough measures against Iran, even though domestic economic issues loom larger in the public's perception. Conducted in partnership with Pechter Middle East Polls, a new, Princeton-based research organization, the survey involved face-to-face interviews with a representative sample of 1,000 Saudi citizens in the major metropolitan areas of Riyadh, Jeddah, and Dammam/al-Khobar. A comparable poll was conducted in Egypt during the same period, with a representative national sample of 1,000.

Majority of Saudis Support New Sanctions

A solid majority (57 percent) of urban Saudis approved of "stronger sanctions against Iran" if it "does not accept new limits on its nuclear program," with 22 percent "strongly" in favor (compared to only 11 percent strongly opposed). Moreover, the level of popular support for sanctions was high across all key demographic categories: age, education, social class, gender, and region. For example, Jeddah showed 57 percent approval, Riyadh 59 percent, and Dammam/al-Khobar 54 percent.

One-Third of Saudis Would Support a U.S. Strike

More surprisingly, a third of urban Saudis said that they would approve "an American military strike against the Iranian nuclear facilities" if Tehran refuses to restrict its activities in this field. But a majority disagreed: one-third were "somewhat" opposed to such action, and the remaining third were "strongly" opposed. These responses showed modest variation by demographic categories. In Riyadh, for instance, 38 percent would support a U.S. strike, while in Jeddah, far to the west, the number dropped to 27 percent. Moreover, among Saudis with only an elementary-school education, 37 percent would support a military strike, but among those with a high school diploma or higher, the figure was 30 percent.

Less Support for Israeli Strike

Asked about an Israeli military strike against Iran, one-quarter of urban Saudis said that they would support it at least "to some extent." Interestingly, that figure is three times larger than the number of respondents who said that they would accept Israel "as a Jewish state," even "under the right conditions" -- a mere 9 percent of urban Saudis

took that position. But regional differences are relatively significant here: in Jeddah, hypothetical acceptance of a Jewish state was 17 percent, compared to barely 4 percent in Riyadh or Dammam/al-Khobar.

Iran a Lesser Threat than Terrorism or Religious Extremism

In response to an open-ended question about the greatest external threats to their country, many of the Saudis cited issues of terrorism or religious extremism. In fact, these issues led the list by a large margin, with each garnering around 20 percent of total first mentions. Issues related to Iran and Israel lagged far behind, barely registering in double digits even when first and second mentions were combined. On a related question, more than half (54 percent) of urban Saudis said that "religious extremism is a serious problem" in their country, including 28 percent who strongly believe this.

These perceptions should also be placed in the broader perspective of overall popular concerns. As noted in [PolicyWatch #1614 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3156\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=3156), "Polling Saudis and Egyptians: Iran, Jihad, and the Economy," most urban Saudis now see economic rather than security or social issues as their country's top priority. In response to another open-ended question, two-thirds named inflation, unemployment, poverty, or corruption as first-priority issues, while a mere 7 percent cited terrorism. And foreign policy issues on any front -- whether Iran, Israel, or elsewhere -- were not cited at all.

Local Differences

Findings from other questions in the survey support the view that, in some respects, Saudi attitudes tend in an increasingly hardline Islamic direction as one moves eastward, from Jeddah on the Red Sea, to Riyadh in central Nejd, to Dammam/al-Khobar in the Eastern Province. Asked about al-Qaeda, for example, 16 percent of respondents in Jeddah voiced favorable opinions, compared to 21 percent in Riyadh and 31 percent in Dammam/al-Khobar. Similarly, when asked whether "financially supporting armed mujahedin fighting in various places around the world is an Islamic duty," 32 percent in Jeddah said yes, compared to 36 percent in Riyadh and 42 percent in Dammam/al-Khobar.

Comparisons with Egypt

The poll data show that Egyptians are significantly less likely than urban Saudis to favor tough action against Iran. For example, the proportion of Egyptians who support new sanctions barely tops 40 percent and has declined moderately since June 2009, in contrast to the majority support in Saudi Arabia. Similarly, just one-quarter of Egyptians, compared to a third of Saudis, would support U.S. military action, and even fewer would approve an Israeli strike (17 percent).

At the same time, the Egyptian respondents were somewhat more likely to say that they could accept Israel as a Jewish state, although this remained a distinctly minority opinion (26 percent) even after thirty years of formal Egyptian-Israeli peace. As mentioned previously, the Egyptian survey was of a national sample that included both rural and urban respondents, but the differences on this question by type of residence were very small. Moreover, those who would accept Israel as a Jewish state were no more likely than others to approve an Israeli strike against Iran.

Policy Implications

Neither Saudi Arabia nor Egypt is a democracy in which public opinion has a direct impact on foreign policy. Moreover, the Saudi public seems more concerned about terrorism and religious extremism than any direct threat from Iran -- and more concerned still about their own economic situation. Nevertheless, these findings clearly suggest that the United States can point to significant Saudi popular support for stiffer sanctions against Iran, and perhaps even for the threat of military action, albeit to a lesser degree. In addition, Saudi popular sympathy for al-

Qaeda is quite low, indicating a largely favorable climate for government counterterrorism efforts aimed at the organization.

On other issues, however, public opinion could pose considerable obstacles to proposed Saudi or U.S.-backed initiatives. For example, a large minority of urban Saudis -- nearly 40 percent overall -- believe that it is an Islamic duty to aid armed mujahedin around the world. And only a very small minority seem receptive to any proposals for "normalization" with Israel, given the overwhelming majority opposition to accepting the country as a Jewish state under any circumstances.

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.](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=290) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=290>) ❖

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