

The Mideast Opinion Gap

By Jim Lobe | February 12, 2007

U.S. and Israeli hopes of forging a Sunni Arab alliance to contain Iran and its regional allies may be misplaced, at least at the popular level, according to a major survey of six Arab countries released February 8.

The face-to-face survey of 3,850 respondents in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) found that close to 80 % of Arabs consider Israel and the United States the two biggest external threats to their security. Only 6 % cited Iran.

And fewer than 25 % of Arabs polled believe that Iran should be pressured to halt its nuclear program, while 61 %, including majorities in all six countries, said Tehran had the right to pursue it even if, as most believe, the program is designed to develop nuclear weapons.

The poll, the fifth in an annual series conducted by Zogby International and designed by Shibley Telhami, a senior fellow at the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Washington-based Brookings Institution, was carried out in November and early December—after last summer's Israel-Hezbollah conflict in Lebanon but before the execution of former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

The latter event has widened the divide between Shiites and Sunni Muslims throughout the region, according to some reports, and played into recent U.S. efforts to forge a de facto alliance between Israel and Sunni-led Arab states, including Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf sheikhdoms, to contain what they see as growing Iranian influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine.

But Telhami, who will present his findings at a major Brookings-sponsored conference of Islamic leaders in Doha this week, told the Inter Press Service that he doubts these sectarian tensions are changing basic attitudes among the general public on key regional issues in the countries covered in the survey, with the exception of Lebanon.

"The public of the Arab world is not looking at the important issues through the Sunni-Shiite divide," Telhami said. "They see them rather through the lens of Israeli-Palestinian issues and anger with U.S. policy [in the

region]. Most Sunni Arabs take the side of the Shiites on the important issues."

Indeed, the survey strongly suggests that the United States, whose image in the Arab world has fallen to an all-time low over the past year according to this and other recent polls, faces a steep uphill battle in rallying Arab public opinion behind it on critical regional questions.

More than 75 % of all respondents described their attitudes toward Washington as either "somewhat" (21 %) or "very" (57 %) unfavorable. Negative feelings were strongest in the three monarchies: Jordan, where 90 % of respondents described their views as unfavorable, Morocco (87 %), and Saudi Arabia (82 %).

After aggregating the poll results in each country and weighting them by national population, the survey found that nearly four out of 10 Arabs named President George W. Bush as the foreign leader they most disliked, far ahead of two Israeli leaders, Ariel Sharon (11 %), and Sharon's successor, Ehud Olmert (7 %). Bush's unpopularity was particularly remarkable, according to Telhami, because in Telhami's 2005 survey, Sharon led Bush in the "most disliked" category by a margin of up to 45 %. Even in Lebanon Bush was found to be more than twice as disliked as Olmert, despite Olmert's role in destroying much of Lebanon's infrastructure during Israel's conflict with Hezbollah.

The most effective way for Bush to improve Arab opinion on the United States, according to the survey, would be by brokering a comprehensive peace between Israelis and Palestinians based on Israel's return to its 1967 borders.

Asked to choose among six possible actions Washington could take to improve its image, substantial majorities or pluralities of respondents in every country except Saudi

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Arabia opted for a comprehensive peace settlement. The other choices included withdrawing U.S. troops from Iraq and from the Arabian Peninsula, halting aid to Israel, promoting democracy, and providing more economic aid to the region.

Ironically, only 16 % of respondents in Saudi Arabia, whose leaders have pressed Bush hardest in recent months for a more vigorous U.S. effort to achieve a peace agreement, chose the Arab-Israeli option. That was their fourth choice, behind withdrawing U.S. forces from Iraq and from the Arabian Peninsula and stopping aid to Israel.

Asked to rate the importance of the Arab-Israeli conflict in developing their attitudes toward the United States on a five-point scale, 76 % of Jordanians, 65 % of Moroccans, 62 % of Lebanese, and 54 % of Saudis gave it a five, or a rating of “extremely important.” Majorities in every country said they were prepared for peace with Israel based on its return to the 1967 borders, but among those who said so, most also said they did “not believe the Israelis will give up the territories [it has occupied] peacefully.”

On the other hand, pluralities in both Saudi Arabia (42 %) and Jordan (36 %) said that “Arabs should continue to fight Israel” even if it returned to its 1967 borders. Weighted by national population, the survey found that 61 % of Arabs would accept such an agreement. “That is much more than I had expected,” noted Telhami.

Bush has displaced Sharon as the most disliked leader of 2006, but on the opposite end of the spectrum, Hassan Nasrallah, the Iranian-backed leader of Hezbollah, has

displaced French President Jacques Chirac as the most admired, according to survey.

Asked to volunteer their favorite for that category, the weighted aggregate of 14 % named Nasrallah; Chirac claimed 8 %; Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad received 4 %; and Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez got 3 % of the vote. “These are people who are seen to have stood up to the United States,” Telhami said, adding, “Not a single one is a Sunni Arab.”

As in the past several years, large majorities of Arabs attribute less benign objectives to U.S. policy in the region, including “controlling oil”; “protecting Israel”; “weakening the Muslim World”; and “the desire to dominate the region.” A mere 9 % of the respondents said they believed one of Washington’s main objectives was promoting democracy.

Significantly, popular majorities—ranging from 51 % in Lebanon to 68 % in Jordan and 77 % in Morocco—believe that Iran has the right to pursue a nuclear program.

“Even in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, whose governments are really frightened about Iranian power, their publics do not define Iran as the major threat,” said Telhami, adding that this fact tends to confirm the idea that Arab leaders and their citizens do not see key issues through the same prism.

Jim Lobe is the Washington bureau chief of the Inter Press Service and a contributor to Right Web (rightweb.irc-online.org).

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