

An Arab Assessment of Iranian Foreign Policy⁽¹⁾

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The Arab Opinion Index data provides a look at a number of important issues, including assessments of foreign policy. Every year, the Index asks respondents across the Arab world their opinions on regional and world powers as well as specific foreign policy developments. Aggregate opinions may provide a general assessment of where the Arab world stands, but to understand fully the divisions and polarization that exists in the region today, it is important to look at country differences.

In this paper, we will review Arab public opinion towards Iran, and whether there are sub-regional variations in assessment towards Iranian foreign policy. In this way, we can gauge whether polarization on the Iranian issue exists, and where it is most prevalent.

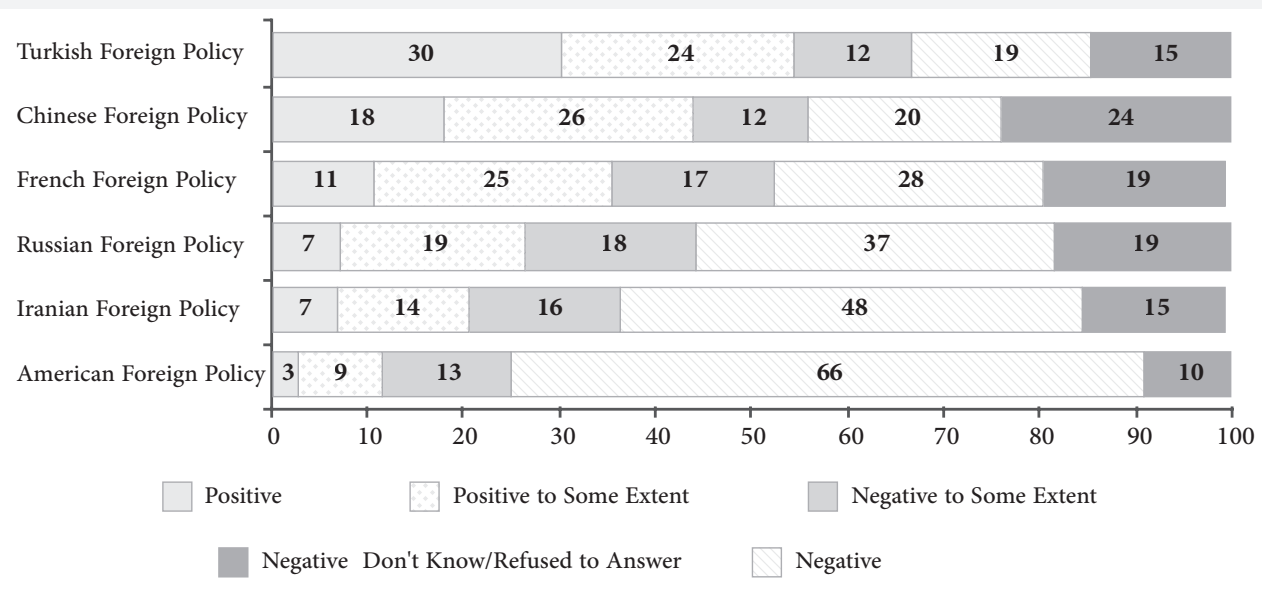
Arab Public Opinion Arab Opinion Index Iranian foreign policy survey methods

General Assessments

General assessments of Iranian foreign policy, in aggregate, show that the majority of Arabs view Iranian foreign policy negatively. 64% of Arabs view Iranian foreign policy as negative, or negative to some degree. This is in contrast to views of Turkish

foreign policy, in which 54% of Arabs find Turkish policy positive, or positive to some degree. The only country with worse foreign policy assessments than Iran is the US (79% negative).

Graph 1: Overall Assessment by the Arab Public Towards the Foreign Policies of Major Global and Regional Powers in 2017 / 2018



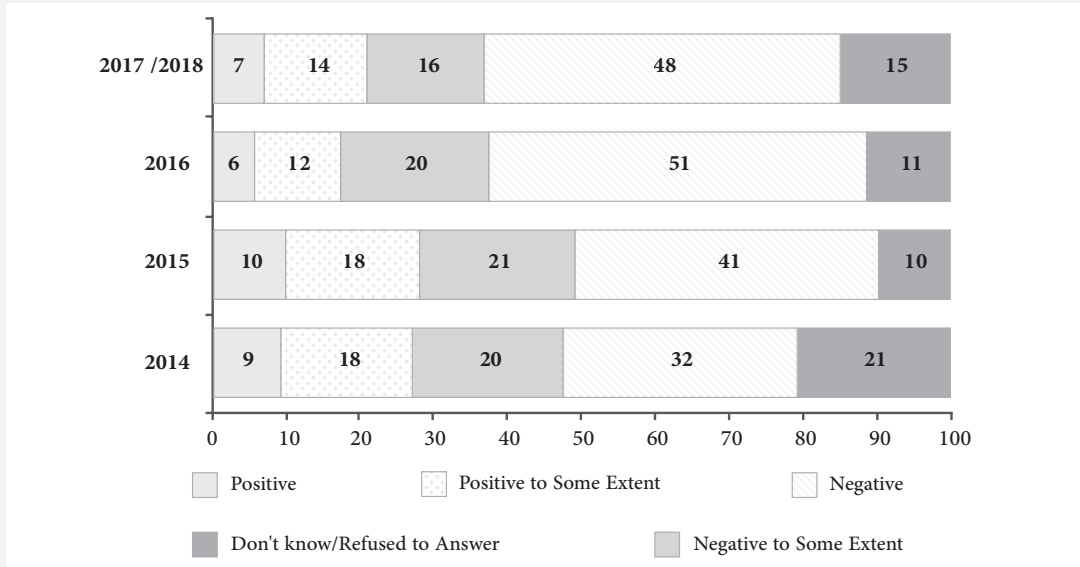
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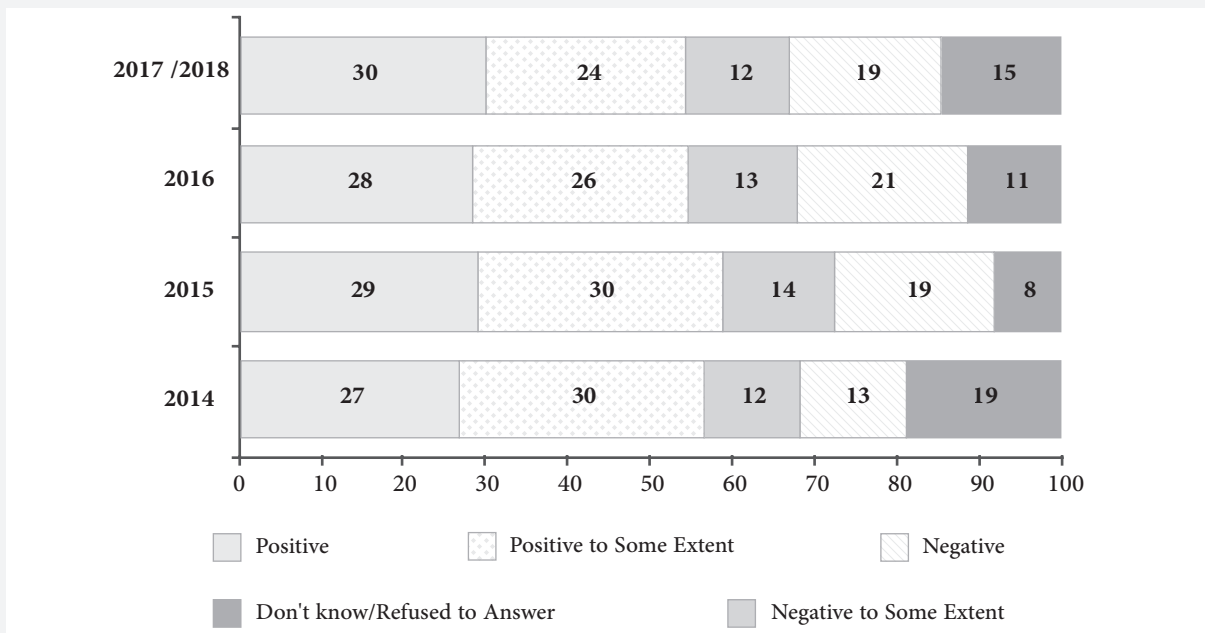
he yearly comparison that the assessments of Iranian foreign policy have generally worsened over time. Since 2014, the percentage of respondents that view Iranian foreign policy as negative has increased 12%,

from 52% in 2014 to 64% today. In contrast, Turkish foreign policy has remained consistent, fluctuating between 57% positive to 54% positive from 2014 until today.

Graph 2: Overall Assessment by the Arab Public Towards the Foreign Policies of Iran From 2014-2017/2018



Graph 3: Overall Assessment by the Arab Public Towards the Foreign Policies of Turkey From 2014-2017/2018



In each survey, we also ask about threat perceptions, i.e. which country the respondent perceives to be the largest threat to the region. Predictably, in the general

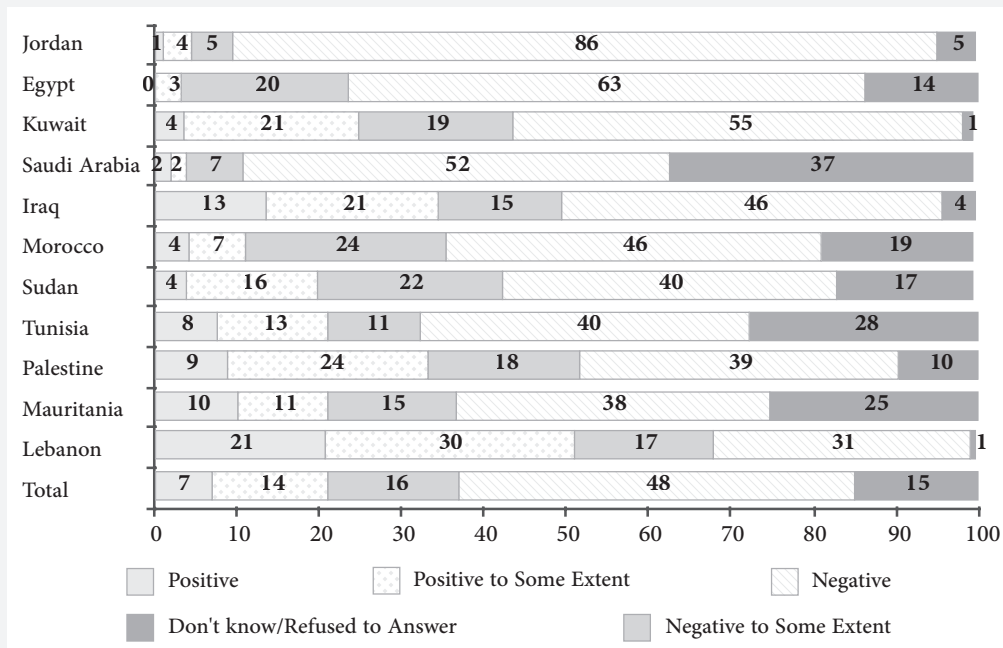
sample, Israel is the largest threat, followed by the US, and in third place Iran.

Country Breakdowns

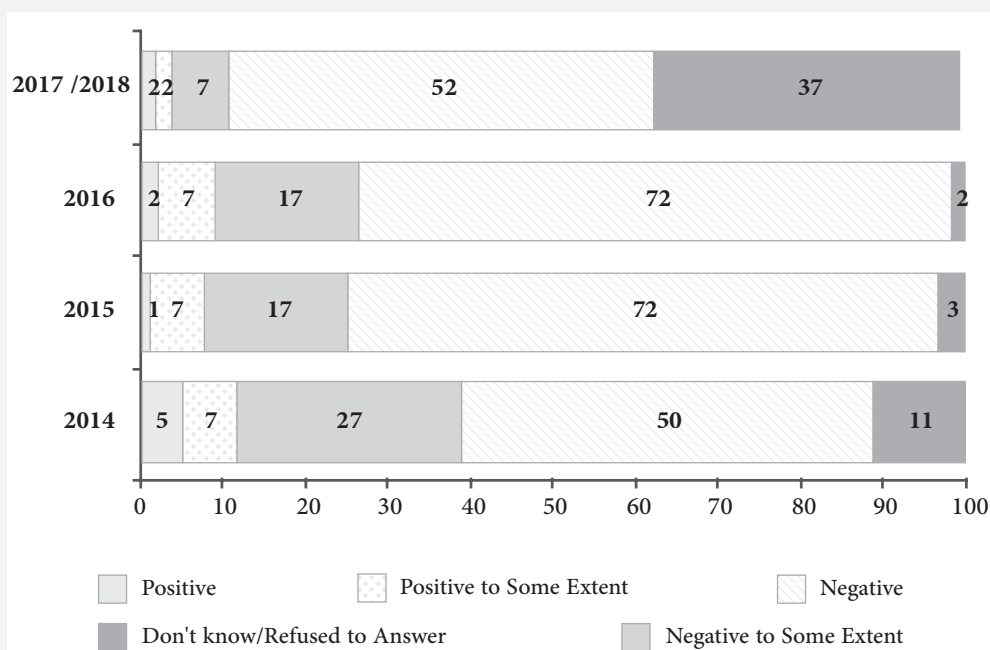
When we break down the assessment by country, we find wide variations across the Arab world. The worst assessment of Iranian foreign policy exists in Jordan, at 91%. Egypt, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia follow, with 83% of Egyptians, 74% of Kuwaitis,

and 59% of Saudi Arabians viewing Iranian foreign policy negatively. The best assessments of Iranian foreign policy come from the Lebanese sample, with 51% viewing Iranian foreign policy positively. No other country comes close to this level of approval.

Graph 4: Overall Assessment by the Arab Public Towards the Foreign Policies of Iran broken down by Country in 2017 / 2018



Graph 5: Overall Assessment by the Saudi Public Towards the Foreign Policies of Iran from 2014-2017 / 2018



What is interesting when viewing these country breakdowns is that the Saudi Arabian sample has a very high non-response rate (37%, compared to the regional average of 15%). As previously mentioned, 59% of the Saudi sample views Iranian foreign policy negatively, in comparison to only 4% that view Iranian policy positively. That leaves a very large segment of the sample undecided, or refusing to answer. Given official Saudi policy on Iran, this is understandable; Saudi Arabian respondents may not feel comfortable giving an honest opinion on this

topic. A closer look at yearly comparisons for Saudi Arabia demonstrates this dynamic.

With regards to threat perception, as previously mentioned, Iran is the third most prevalent response as the most dangerous country to the Arab world. However, when we break down the responses by country, we find that there are a few key differences between them. Israel is the top ranked security threat across the Arab world except in 2 countries: Palestine and Saudi Arabia.

Table 1: Threat Perception of the Arab Publics in 2017/2018

The Countries that Are Most Threatening Respondent Country	Israel	United States	Iran	Arab Countries	Russia	European Countries	Other Countries	Turkey	Don't Know/Refused to Answer	There are No threats to the Arab World	Total
Lebanon	65	21	1	7	0	0	--	--	6	0	100
Mauritania	49	27	3	2	1	1	0	0	15	1	100
Kuwait	48	28	9	0	2	1	--	--	13	--	100
Jordan	47	28	12	5	2	0	0	0	2	2	100
Sudan	47	27	7	8	1	0	1	0	8	1	100
Iraq	42	30	10	10	0	0	0	1	6	--	100
Morocco	35	23	6	9	4	1	1	1	18	3	100
Egypt	35	35	10	5	3	1	1	4	5	0	100
Tunisia	31	35	4	13	1	1	0	0	15	0	100
Palestine	22	55	7	8	2	1	2	0	2	1	100
Saudi Arabia	10	3	37	5	4	--	--	--	10	31	100
Overall	39	28	10	7	2	1	0	1	8	4	100

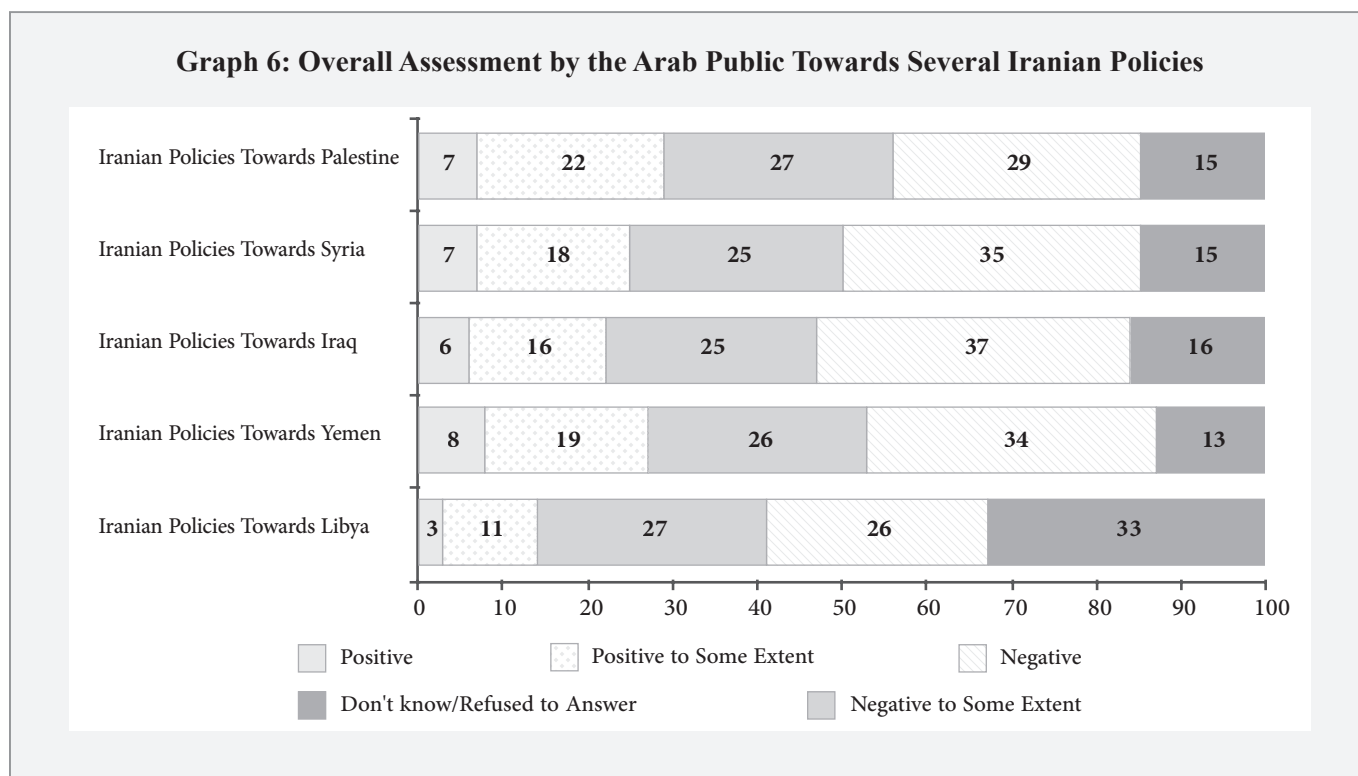
In Palestine, the US is considered more dangerous than Israel or Iran. This is most likely due to the US role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In Saudi Arabia, the results were very dissimilar to the rest of the region. First, the Saudi Arabian sample had a 31% non-response rate. This is in comparison to the 4% non-response rate in the rest of the region. Of the remaining 69% of the sample, 37% chose Iran as the largest threat to the Arab world, followed by Israel at

10% and the US at 3% - the lowest ranking received by the US across the region. It is clear that in the Saudi Arabian population, the sample is bifurcated; a large segment of the sample does not feel comfortable responding to the question at all, whereas another large segment (37%) identifies Iran as the largest threat. Nonetheless, it is unclear what portion of that 37% is due to acquiescence bias.

Reasons for Negative Assessments of Iranian foreign policy

Iranian foreign policy towards a variety of issues seems to be evenly negative across the board. For instance, Iranian foreign policy towards Palestine – despite the self-professed Iranian position on the

issue of Palestine – is deemed negative by 56% of the population. Many other foreign policy issues have similar negative scores, including the Iranian position on Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.



There are a number of factors which may affect the perception of respondents towards Iranian foreign policy. For instance, a respondent’s position towards the rest of the Arab world may make them more or less likely to support Iranian foreign policy in the region. Those who view the Arab world as a more cohesive unit may have more negative opinions of Iranian foreign policy or aggression, whereas those who believe they have less ties to the rest of the Arab world may not be so concerned with Iranian foreign policy.

To examine this question, we utilized our survey item on respondent position towards the Arab world, in comparison with the question on Iranian foreign policy. In the Arab world question, we specifically ask which of the three statements they most agree with:

The question on Iranian foreign policy asked them to rank how positive or negative Iranian policy was

towards the region, from negative (with a score of 4) to positive (with a score of 1).

To ascertain the difference between respondents, we pooled those who agreed with statement 1 and statement 2 into one group. We also pooled those who scored Iranian foreign policy a 3 (negative to some extent) and a 4 (negative). 76% of those who agree that the Arab world is one cohesive unit scored Iranian foreign policy negatively. This is in comparison to 73% of respondents who scored Iranian foreign policy negatively among those who believe that the Arab world is not a cohesive unit. From there, we can conduct a simple Z-test to see if the difference in proportions is statistically significant. While the difference between 73% and 76% is not large, we find that the z-score 3.2825, much higher than the threshold of 1.96. This is statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level, meaning there is a major difference between those who view the Arab world as one unit, and those who do not. Clearly, a respondent’s views

regarding the rest of the Arab world affects their assessment of Iranian foreign policy.

Another possible factor that could affect how respondents perceive Iranian foreign policy is their beliefs about democracy. Those with more of a commitment to democracy or democratic values may resent Iranian intervention in the region on behalf of authoritarian regimes such as the Assad regime in Syria. Democratic values and negative perception

of Iranian foreign policy may not be causally linked; rather, they may be correlated through a third latent variable, unidentified in the data. Nevertheless, it is important to see if such a relationship exists.

To examine this question, we utilized our survey item on respondent position towards democracy, in comparison with the question on Iranian foreign policy. Specifically, we ask how much respondents agree or disagree with the following statement:

Our society is not ready to engage with a democratic system

The question on Iranian foreign policy asked them to rank how positive or negative Iranian policy was towards the region, from negative (with a score of 4) to positive (with a score of 1).

To ascertain the difference between respondents, we pooled those who scored Iranian foreign policy a 3 (negative to some extent) and a 4 (negative). Results show that 77% of those who disagree that democracy is not suited for their society find Iranian foreign policy negative. This is in comparison to 71% of respondents who scored Iranian foreign policy negatively among

those who agree that democracy is not suited for their society. From there, we can conduct a simple Z-test to see if the difference in proportions is statistically significant. While the difference between 71% and 77% may not seem large, we find that the z-score is 8.0776, much higher than the threshold of 1.96. This is statistically significant at the $p < 0.01$ level, meaning there is a major difference between those who espouse democratic values, and those who do not. Clearly, a respondent's views regarding democracy and its suitability for the region affects their assessment of Iranian foreign policy.

Conclusion

The two abovementioned tests are only two examples of possible factors that determine or affect perceptions of Iranian foreign policy, but there may be many more. What is important to note here is that Iranian foreign policy is widely perceived as negative in all but a few countries. Even within the few countries,

we have issues with non-response and acquiescence bias. Thus it becomes clear that Arab perception of Iran is overwhelmingly unified on the question of Iran, and that perceptions have gotten worse since 2011.