

US Policy in Arab Gulf Opinion: Data from Saudi Arabia and Kuwait⁽¹⁾

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This study aims to present the results of the Saudi and Kuwaiti opinion poll on US policy in the Arab region. The study attempts to analyze how Gulf Arab citizens view US policy since President Donald Trump took office. Kuwaiti respondents have more condemned US policies in the last five years than the Saudis. The study draws on data provided by the Arab Opinion Index, which has been published by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies every year since 2011.

Saudi Arabia

Kuwait

US Policy

Arab Opinion

With the ascent of the Trump administration, it seemed as if the Saudi and Emirati regimes became closer than ever to US decision-makers. The relationship between Mohammad Bin Salman and Jared Kushner, for example, became widely known, and used as an indication of the closeness between the two countries. Similarly, the Emirati ambassador was very popular in Washington DC circles, and known for his connections to the most important foreign policy experts and decision-makers. Overall, following the end of the Obama administration, both countries in the Gulf developed much better ties with the US and pursued their foreign policy based on these connections. It was on this basis that the Saudi-Emirati axis pursued the blockade against Qatar, increased aggression in Yemen, and so on.

But does this official policy reflect broader public opinion? How do Gulf citizens view the United States in the era of Trump? The Arab Public Opinion Index has conducted surveys in two different Gulf countries: Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Given political constraints, it was not possible to conduct surveys elsewhere. But, these two countries provide an interesting contrast; Kuwait is more politically open, whereas Saudi Arabia is increasingly more restrictive of political expression and activism. Kuwait also has a less antagonistic relationship with Iran compared to Saudi Arabia. For these reasons, it is useful to employ both these cases in the analysis of public opinion towards the US, because it provides us a look at public opinion across the political spectrum of the Gulf.

Views of the US

To begin with the most basic question regarding respondent views of the US. In the latest 2017/2018 iteration of the Arab public opinion index, we find that Kuwaitis are much more critical than Saudis on average. 88% of Kuwaitis reported that they had a negative or somewhat negative view of the United States, compared to 26% of Saudis. However, in Saudi Arabia, there was a large rate of non-response. A full 48% - close to half - of the respondents refused to answer this question. This is not the norm for

previous surveys conducted. In fact, in 2016, the non-response rate on this question in Saudi Arabia was only 2%. That is a significant jump between 2016 and 2017/2018.

It is unclear as to why exactly this is the case, but we can make some educated guesses. Given that the Saudi regime has touted its alliance with Trump versus its negative relationship with Obama, and the fact that the Saudi regime views its relationship with the US as key to resolving some of their existential

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issues in the region, it seems the Saudi public has gotten the impression that expressing negative views of the US would be unacceptable. So, from 2016 to 2017/2018, Saudi public opinion went from 63% negative towards the US, to 26% negative, with high rates of non-response.

A similar jump in public opinion occurred between 2014 and 2015: from 20% disapproval of the US in 2014 to 51% in 2015. Again, we cannot be fully sure what caused this shift, but we can conjecture

that conclusion of the Iranian nuclear deal in 2015 – widely criticized in Saudi Arabia for its problematic omissions – may have had an impact. However, the key difference between the two shifts is the non-response rate. We can be sure that the shift in 2014 – 2015 was as a result of a real change in opinion, because the non-response rate for both years does not exceed 10%. This does not compare in magnitude, of course, to the non-response rate of 48% in 2017/2018, which also weakens our understanding of precise public sentiment.

Views of the biggest threat according to Kuwait and Saudi Arabian respondents

Despite the overall negative view of the US, particularly in Kuwait, respondents from both countries do not see it as the biggest threat to the region. Understandably, the majority of both Kuwaiti and Saudi respondents point to Iran as the biggest threat to their countries (52% and 42% respectively). This makes sense given the actions of the Iranian regime around the Strait of Hormuz, in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, as well as in supporting operations within Saudi Arabia itself.

The differences between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia lies in the perception of their respondents to Israel and the US. 16% of Kuwaiti respondents pointed to Israel as the biggest threat, and 17% pointed to the US. In comparison, only 2% of Saudis viewed Israel

as the biggest threat, and 3% pointed to the US. This is a stark contrast between the two countries.

Non-response rates on this question continue to be high. A full 37% of Saudi respondents did not specify any country as a threat to Saudi Arabia. We cannot know for certain why this is the case; perhaps Saudi Arabian respondents are under the impression there is no threat their country cannot face adequately, or perhaps they are under the impression they cannot voice such a concern without seeming overly critical. We can only conjecture, given what we know about freedom of expression in Saudi Arabia today. Nevertheless, what this makes clear is that there are underlying factors affecting Saudi public opinion that are not captured by this survey question alone.

Views of the US in comparison to other countries

Finally, using the Arab Opinion Index, we can see how perceptions of the US compare to perceptions of other important countries for the region.

In Kuwait, the highest ranked country is Turkey, with 60% of respondents saying they have a positive or somewhat positive view of the country. China follows at 54%, Russia at 37%, and Iran at 25%.

In comparison, as mentioned above, the US polls at 10% approval.

In Saudi Arabia, perceptions of all these countries are decisively less positive than in Kuwait. China has a 25% approval rating, Turkey is at 24%, Russia is at 10%, and Iran is at 4%. The US, however, is at 25% (notwithstanding the 48% non-response rate).

Conclusion

All in all, it seems that the 2016 election of Trump, and the subsequent reconfiguration of Gulf foreign policy particularly on the part of Saudi Arabia, has

had ramifications at the level of public opinion. Kuwaiti respondents – who enjoy more freedom of expression than their Saudi counterparts – report the

highest level of disapproval of the US in the past 5 years. Saudi Arabian respondents – limited by their ability to express their preferences more freely – have a high rate of non-response, indicating they do not feel comfortable addressing the US given Saudi policy.

It remains to be seen whether the events of the last year, specifically with regards to Iran and its greater level of intervention, will vary the impressions of Gulf respondents in the next iteration of the index.