

Poll: Russia Wields Most Influence in Middle East; Netanyahu Least Popular Leader

The survey was conducted by the Pew Research Center in five Middle Eastern states, including Israel.

Almost two-thirds of respondents to a recent public opinion poll in five Middle Eastern states said Russia, Turkey and the United States increased their influence in the region over the past decade. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was voted the least popular leader in the region, trailing behind even Syrian President Bashar Assad and Iranian President Hassan Rohani.

The poll, which was conducted by Washington's Pew Research Center, examined views on regional geopolitics in Tunisia, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel and Turkey.

While 64 percent of respondents across the region said Russia's influence in the Middle East today is greater than it was a decade ago, similar numbers — 63 and 62 percent, respectively — said the same was true of Turkey and of the United States.

More than half, 53 percent, said Iran's regional influence rose in the past decade, compared to 46 percent for Israel and 41 percent for Saudi Arabia. The only country in the region that lost influence in the past 10 years, according to the poll, was Egypt, with 46 percent of respondents saying it was less influential today and just 19 percent saying its regional influence had increased since a decade ago.

The poll examined attitudes in the five surveyed states to the leaders of other countries in the region. (Respondents were not asked about the leaders in their own countries.) Overall, the poll showed negative attitudes to leaders in the region, but the country-by-country results are edifying.

In Jordan, Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud Salman was the overwhelming favorite, with 86 percent of respondents saying they viewed him favorably. Two-thirds, 66 percent, of respondents in Jordan said the same about

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Netanyahu was voted the least popular regional leader by Jordanians who participated in the poll, with only 1 percent saying they viewed him favorably. Jordan and Egypt are the only Arab states that have a peace agreement with Israel.

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In Turkey, the only regional leader that was viewed favorably by more than 20 percent of respondents was the Saudi monarch. All the other regional leaders were viewed negatively by an overwhelming majority of Turkish respondents, with Netanyahu again the least popular with 7 percent of the “votes.”

In Israel, the most popular regional leaders were Egypt’s President Abdel-Fattah al-Sissi and Jordan’s King Abdullah II, who were viewed positively by 44 and 43 percent of respondents, respectively. Erdogan and Salman were viewed favorably by 15 and 14 percent of Israeli respondents, respectively. Fewer than 7 percent gave a nod to Assad or to Rohani.

In fact, the only country out of those surveyed where Assad and Rohani enjoyed some degree of popularity was Lebanon, where 45 percent of respondents viewed both favorably. Erdogan was slightly less popular, at 42 percent, while Netanyahu came in last, with 0 percent of Lebanese expressing favorable views of him.

Not surprisingly, the results in Lebanon were split along ethnic and religious lines. Shi’ite Muslims were more likely to view Assad and Rohani positively, Christians were more inclined to approve of Sissi and Sunni Muslims more likely to hold favorable views of Erdogan.

In Tunisia, Erdogan won the popularity contest, with 59 percent of respondents saying they viewed him favorably. Netanyahu was the least popular, with only 7 percent expressing such a view.

Nearly one-third of all respondents to the poll, 32 percent, said they believed the Syrian civil war would end within the next five years. Nearly as many, 29 percent, believed it will continue for at least five more years, and just 26 percent said they thought it would be over by the end of 2018.

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