American Public Sees Democratization of Middle East as Positive for U.S.

Americans Favor Democratization
Even If Countries Become Less Friendly to U.S. Interests

(Washington, D.C.) - An overwhelming majority of Americans believe that greater democracy in the Middle East would be positive for the United States. Further, a solid majority would favor this happening even if this resulted in Middle Eastern countries becoming more likely to oppose U.S. policies.

These are some of the findings of a new poll conducted by the Anwar Sadat Chair for Peace and Development and the Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA) at the University of Maryland, directed by Shibley Telhami and Steven Kull. The poll of 802 Americans was fielded April 1-5, 2011 by Knowledge Networks.

The poll is being released in conjunction with the opening of the Eighth Annual U.S.-Islamic World Forum being held in Washington, D.C. (April 12-14). The Forum is a joint program of the Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings and the Foreign Ministry of Qatar.

Asked about the impact on the United States over the next few years "if the countries of the Middle East become more democratic," 65 percent say it would be mostly positive, while 31 percent say it would be mostly negative. Asked about "the long run," an even larger number – 76 percent – say democratization would be mostly positive for the United States.

A majority of 57 percent say that they "would want to see a country become more democratic even if this resulted in the country being more likely to oppose U.S. policies." This number is up from 48 percent when PIPA asked this question in 2005.

"While some observers are worried about the potential effects of greater democratization for U.S. interests in the Middle East, most Americans are cheering the move toward more democracy, even if this might pose some challenges for the United States," comments Steven Kull, director of PIPA.

Americans are not entirely confident, though, that the changes occurring in the Arab world will lead to more democracy. Fifty-one percent say that they think it is likely, but 47 percent are more doubtful. This divides sharply along partisan lines with two out of three Republicans pessimistic, two out of three Democrats optimistic, and Independents leaning to the optimistic side.

A greater number (45 percent) see the popular uprisings as mostly "about ordinary people seeking freedom and democracy" than "about Islamist groups seeking political power" (15 percent). Another 37 percent see these forces as being equally influential.

A clear majority, though, believes that "It is possible for Islamic countries to be democratic" (56 percent), while 41 percent say that "democracy and Islam are

incompatible." While a large majority of Democrats hold this position (69 percent) as well as a slight majority of Independents (52 percent), while among Republicans 51 percent say that democracy and Islam are incompatible.

Similarly, 59 percent overall - and 68 percent of Democrats and 59 percent of Independents - think that it is possible for Muslim and Western cultures to find common ground, while 52 percent of Republicans say that violent conflict is inevitable.

Trend line questions show signs of modest improvement in American attitudes toward Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria. Majorities express favorable views of the Arab people in general (56 percent) the Saudi people (57 percent) and especially the Egyptian people (70%)—putting the Egyptian people nearly on a par with the Israeli people (73 percent favorable).

Significant minorities said that the Arab uprisings increased their sympathy for the Arab people (39 percent), and their sense of how similar the aspirations of the Arab world are to theirs (33 percent). Only very small minorities said that it decreased these feelings and perceptions.

"There is evidence that the Arab uprisings have contributed to improving views of Arab countries and quite positive views of the Arab people, especially Egyptians," comments Shibley Telhami, Anwar Sadat chair at the University of Maryland and nonresident senior fellow at Brookings' Saban Center.

Nonetheless, when asked how the United States should position itself relative to the demonstrators and the governments, two thirds say that it should not take a position in Syria, Bahrain, Yemen, Saudi Arabia or Jordan. Among those who favor the United States taking a position, though, they overwhelmingly favor the United States supporting the demonstrators.

Now that the United States has participated in air strikes in Libya, a majority is supportive, with 54 percent approving. However, this is down from 68 percent who approved when CBS News asked this same question in March just as the action was getting started. Views vary by party affiliation with Democrats approving by 63 percent, Republicans by 55 percent and Independents being divided.

If "the air campaign does not succeed in protecting civilians from attacks by Qaddafi's forces," a majority of 59 percent say they would oppose "providing arms to the Libyan rebels."

The uprisings in the Arab world have had little effect on American views of the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Two-thirds continue to have a favorable view of Israel. But the same number also continue to favor the U.S. not taking sides in the conflict—unchanged from a Sadat Chair poll conducted last November.

The dominant view continues to be that the Obama administration's efforts to resolve the conflict are at about the right level, with four in ten taking this position—unchanged from November. Among the rest, while in November more said that the administration was not trying hard enough (30 percent not hard enough, 21 percent too hard), now views are evenly divided.

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