

Religious Divides as Diplomatic Tools: Islamism, Sectarianism, and MENA Public Opinion toward Regional Leaders

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Abstract

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), religious divides such as Islamism and sectarianism shape attitudes toward foreign leaders and their countries. Using Arab Barometer and causal mediation analysis, this study examines how perceptions of regional leaders mediate the effects of these domestic cleavages on Arab public opinion. Results confirm that perceptions of leaders significantly influence favorability toward their countries, though reciprocal effects also exist. Erdoğan's Islamist appeal boosts Turkey's image among Islamists but diminishes it among Shia and secular publics. Khamenei's sectarian alignment strengthens Iran's standing among Shia while limiting broader appeal. Bin Salman's effect is modest, as his post-Salafi reformism fails to offset negative perceptions. Findings show that ideological divides and religious identities act as cognitive filters shaping attitudes toward foreign actors. This dynamic works alongside soft power and structural factors, highlighting how leadership cues shape regional competition under populism and authoritarian rule in MENA and beyond.

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Introduction

Leaders can shape their countries' international image abroad. This "leadership effect" operates through a "personal projection" mechanism, where individuals' attitudes toward a leader influence their views of that leader's country (Boldry, Gaertner, and Quinn 2007; Balmas 2018). Experimental studies confirm this effect by showing that high-level diplomatic visits improve foreign perceptions of both leaders and their countries (Goldsmith et al. 2021), leader traits such as integrity and warmth enhance national image (Ingenhoff and Klein 2018; Balmas et al. 2024), and that leadership changes trigger immediate shifts in attitudes toward countries abroad (Bateson and Weintraub 2022). While historical and contextual factors may also shape a country's image in ways that later bolster a leader's appeal, existing evidence warrants further investigation of leadership effect as a driver of national image, especially in the age of populism and authoritarianism.

A less explored aspect of this subject is how religious cleavages in other countries convey the leadership effect. This study investigates whether leaders' alignment with religious ideologies and sectarian identities enhance their nation's standing among the foreign publics. At first glance, the answer to this question appears to be straightforward, but closer examination reveals substantial complexity. A leader may improve perceptions of their country, yet a nation's established image and soft power may also enhance the leader's standing abroad. International and domestic political contexts further complicate this reciprocal relationship. Ideological alignment between the leader and foreign audiences likely enter the picture as well. While recognizing this complexity, this study asks whether leadership effect through religious cleavages can become a distinct determinant of attitudes toward a country's favorability.

Middle East and North Africa (MENA) is an ideal setting for investigating this puzzle. The 2003 Iraq War, Arab Spring, and multiple civil wars have transformed the region's international politics, introducing new security challenges (Darwich et al. 2022; Gause 2014; Salloukh 2017; Barzegar, 2008). These developments likely inform leaders' foreign policy choices, as they seek to build soft power (Nye 1990) by promoting a positive image to enhance their country's international standing. Simultaneously, Islam continues to be a powerful social force providing the foundation for ideological and sectarian cleavages.

Drawing on insights from the literature on Arab public opinion (Furia and Lucas 2006; Jamal and Tessler 2008; Tessler 2015; Achilov and Sen 2017), this study examines how the alignment between leaders' domestic political preferences and societal cleavages abroad shapes public attitudes toward foreign actors. Specifically, the article examines how Arab publics perceive regional leaders and whether these perceptions are shaped by secular-Islamist and sectarian orientations. It then investigates whether views of leaders based on these religious divides influence attitudes toward their home countries. The study evaluates the extent of this leadership effect relative to the reverse impact of a country's image on leader favorability.

The next section introduces theoretical insights from the literature on leaders and attitudes toward international actors. Then, I discuss how secular-Islamist divide and sectarian identity shape perceptions of leaders and attitudes toward their countries in the Arab world. Theoretical explanation illustrates the individual-level implications of religious cleavages using Erdoğan and Turkey as illustrative cases. Specifically, the analysis first examines Erdoğan's popularity in the region by looking at whether demonstrative piety and appeal to the secular-Islamist cleavage helped him build a positive image for himself and for Turkey in Arab public

sphere. The resulting theoretical insights are applied to the cases of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. These cases offer a comparative perspective and help test the generalizability and limits of insights drawn from the study of Erdoğan's leadership effect.

The third section presents the data and the results of the multilevel causal mediation analysis (Imai et al. 2011) of the Arab Barometer surveys to provide statistical tests for the direct and mediating effects of leadership effect on favorability of their country. The results demonstrate the salience of sectarian identity and Islamist ideology in shaping perceptions of regional leaders and a robust mediating leadership effect on perceptions of leaders' countries in Arab-majority societies. The empirical models also account for the opposite effect of a country's image among Arab citizens on perceptions of its leader. While this latter effect is also statistically significant, the strength and distinctiveness of the leadership effect remains robust.

The comparative analysis of the three cases reveals notable variation in the determinants of leader favorability by contrasting Iran's revolutionary Islamist appeal and sectarian foreign policy, largely shaped by post-2003 security threats (Barzegar 2010), with Saudi Arabia's modernist, post-Salafi shift toward more secular policies (Sinani 2022). These contrasts highlight how contextual factors, and ideological appeals shape the intensity of leadership effects. Khamenei's influence appears weaker than Erdoğan's assertive image, while bin Salman's reformist positioning carries less weight among Arab publics. The discussion and conclusion consider the implications of the analysis for the role of leaders in the age of populism and authoritarianism.

This study shows that leaders' image along religious cleavages can enhance a country's favorability among foreign audiences, offering new insight into how leaders may appeal to publics abroad. The analysis suggests that ideological proximity, religious symbolism, and sectarian cues may be consequential for soft power building. These findings offer a new perspective on soft power competition in MENA and beyond: religious frames mediate public engagement with foreign actors, particularly in authoritarian contexts where populist leaders play a salient role.

Leaders and Perceptions of Foreign Countries

International relations scholars have recognized the role of leaders in shaping global perceptions and influencing the dynamics between nations. Some argue that leaders' choices are a result of international and domestic institutional environment, emphasizing political survival (De Mesquita et al. 2005; Wolford 2007; Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009). Others emphasize leaders' beliefs, personalities, and experiences as drivers of foreign policy choices and outcomes (Hermann 1980; Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015; Kertzer and Tingley 2018). In MENA, both structural factors and leaders' personalities matter for understanding the foreign policy decisions at home and image building abroad (Görener and Ucal 2011; Goldfien, Joseph, and Mcmanus 2023). Foreign public opinion gains significance if it benefits the leader domestically or advances national interests abroad. Although leaders always operate under constraints, they will try to exploit any advantage that might be present in a foreign country such as cultural affinities or shared ideologies.

Experimental and observational studies point to the role of leaders in shaping international public opinion. For example, high-level diplomatic visits increase foreign approval of visiting leaders, confirming that state-driven public diplomacy generates soft power

(Goldsmith et al. 2021). Sudden shocks of leadership change at home may influence a nation's standing abroad as observed in the immediate 10-point drop in trust in the U.S. government across Latin America following Donald J. Trump's 2016 election (Bateson and Weintraub 2022). Further evidence corroborates leader-to-country "spillover effects," where leader traits transfer to attitudes about national image under media exposure (Ingenhoff and Klein 2018).

Balmas (2018) identifies the psychological mechanism behind the leadership effect: *personal projection*, a process where foreign publics generalize leaders' positive attributes (e.g., warmth, competence) to their citizens and country. Here, leader-centric narratives with a positive tone prime national evaluations of the foreign country (Balmas et al. 2024). While policy content may moderate the leadership effect among foreign audiences (Agadjanian & Horiuchi, 2020), the robust findings across different contexts (U.S., Ukraine, Japan, Latin America) imply that leaders' image may serve as a shortcut shaping perceptions of their countries (Boulding 1959; Tetlock 1983). Leaders' friendliness shared political norms, and cultural affinities can serve as cues for less informed publics. (Davies, Edney, and Wang 2021; Furia and Lucas 2006). Furthermore, research indicates that attitudes about a distant group are likely to be based on the perceived image of its prominent members, which usually is the leader (Boldry, Gaertner, and Quinn 2007). Thus, we can confidently propose that when a foreign leader is favorably viewed this will return positive gains for the standing of the country among the public (Alexander, Levin, and Henry 2005):

Hypothesis 1: Positive perceptions about a foreign leader will increase favorable attitudes toward that leader's country.

Any analysis of leadership effects must also account for the hierarchical and reciprocal nature of attitudes. Following Easton (1957), views of a country represent orientations toward a

“higher-order object” compared to perceptions of its leader. While scholarship on foreign publics’ attitudes about leaders is developing, extensive research exists on the determinants of country image, nation branding, and national identity (Boulding 1959; Tetlock 1983; Canel & Sanders 2012; Nye 1990; Ingenhoff and Klein 2018). Given the hierarchical structure of attitudes (Canache 1992), national image likely shapes views of leaders. Disentangling leadership effects thus requires recognizing this two-way relationship. Although this study emphasizes leader perceptions as mediators of national favorability, the reverse effect is also tested in the analysis.

Because the proposed leadership effect implies that leader’s image is a mediating factor, it is crucial to comprehend how individuals form their opinions about the leaders to make up their minds about foreign countries. While leadership traits and personality have been the focus of existing research (Kertzer and Tingley 2018), it is likely that perceptions about these qualities are filtered through cognitive frames about issues and ideas that are most familiar and salient to individuals in their immediate surroundings (Davies, Edney, and Wang 2021; Furia and Lucas 2006). This filtering gives way to cue-taking from the foreign leader. Therefore, political divisions within a foreign country and the extent of outside leaders’ alignment with these divisions should influence attitudes.

I argue that shared cultural beliefs and alignment of ideologies between leaders and foreign publics will shape attitudes. In MENA, the secular-Islamist divide, and sectarian frames serve as salient cultural references, guiding how people form views on domestic and international actors. The next section examines how perceptions of foreign leaders are reflected on attitudes toward their countries, focusing first on Erdoğan’s image-building strategy in Turkey, then extending the analysis to Arab attitudes toward Khamenei in Iran and bin Salman in Saudi Arabia. These cases serve as plausible probes for testing the generalizability of the

proposed mechanisms inspired by the Turkish case. The comparative approach evaluates how religious divides shapes Arab public opinion about international actors by contrasting Erdoğan's pragmatic appeal to political Islamists, Khamenei's unifying Islamist discourse combined with the securitization of sectarian identity, and bin Salman's post-Salafi, secularizing rhetoric.

Religion and Leader Popularity in MENA

The Arab public sphere has always been susceptible to international influence from ambitious foreign leaders competing for a regional leadership role. Leaders like Gamal Abd al Nasser, Imam Khomeini, and Saddam Hussein, have often leveraged the regional public sphere to boost their image. At the current juncture, the rise of populist leaders and recent international developments increase the likelihood of this appeal in Arab-majority societies and beyond.

Historically, political cleavages like pan-Arabism and pan-Islamism provided the necessary backdrop for leaders' transnational influence in MENA (Telhami 2013). Recent events like the 2003 Iraq War, Arab Spring, and regional civil wars rekindled a "new Arab Cold War," between Iran and Gulf countries creating new opportunities for appealing to the regional publics around domestic cleavages (Gause 2014). The Arab Spring reshaped ideologies like Islamism, while post-2003 Iraq deepened the Iran–Arab divide. Iran's use of proxy groups fueled the securitization of sectarianism and heightened regional threat perceptions (Barzegar 2010; Darwich 2016). These dynamics also increased Turkey's regional role despite its democratic erosion and increasing Islamization at home and in foreign policy (Kutlay and Öniş 2021). As security challenges intensified in MENA, Islamism and sectarianism emerged as salient frames through which ordinary citizens likely interpret complex international issues and foreign actors. Existing research has already confirmed that Islam and sectarian frameworks are employed by regional leaders and non-state actors to appeal to the masses in MENA (Barzegar 2008; Gause

2014; Darwich 2016; Ciftci and Tezcür 2016; Taş 2022). We should consider perceptions about foreign leaders like Erdoğan, Khamenei, and bin Salman in this context.

Leadership Effect and National Image: The Turkish Case

Turkey and Erdoğan enjoy widespread popularity in the Arab world (Ceyhun 2018; Kayyali 2021), especially since Turkey's post-2000 foreign policy shift toward the region (Akgün et al. 2009). Erdoğan's refusal to support the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq and his 2009 clash with Israel's president over Gaza in Davos Forum improved his image as an anti-imperialist leader defending the Palestinian cause, a litmus test for political legitimacy in Arab public opinion (Altunışık 2010; Telhami 2013). These moments resonated with popular expectations and are aligned with positive views of Turkey's developmental model, Western ties, and Islam-democracy synthesis (Taşpınar 2012), representing the long-term, civilization appeal of Turkey.

Once seen as a model Muslim democracy, Turkey's appeal declined after the Arab Spring due to its authoritarian turn and vulnerability to global economic crises (Kutlay and Öniş 2021; Tuğal 2016). Yet Erdoğan's image endured, bolstered by his demonstrative piety and Islamist credentials, which aligned with the values of Islamic political movements (Taş 2022). His personal appeal helped shaped attitudes toward Turkey (Author XXXX), particularly as Arab publics engaged more rationally with regional politics (Lynch 2003). Accompanying Erdoğan's image was the enhancement of Turkish soft power through TV dramas, tourism, and religious outreach by the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Diyanet) to further reinforce these favorable perceptions (Yörük and Vatikiotis 2013; Aras and Mohammed 2019; Öztürk and Sözeri 2018).¹

However, polls show a volatile pattern of support for Turkey and its leader over time. Turkey's favorability, for instance, peaked at 78 percent in 2010 but declined thereafter, especially in Egypt and Syria, where its support for the Muslim Brotherhood and opposition

groups proved divisive (Akgün and Gündoğar 2014; Zogby 2019). This trend illustrates how short-term foreign policy actions can shape regional perceptions alongside deeper structural factors. Religion as a tool of public diplomacy operates through both civilizational affinities and shifting ideological alignments. Demonstrative piety and ideological cues foster positive images via shared norms, while evolving ideological trends and sectarian positioning are conveyed through foreign policy. These mechanisms help publics make sense of complex regional dynamics and evaluate foreign leaders, a point developed further in the following sections.

Secular-Islamist Cleavage and Leader Popularity

Islamism emerged as a political ideology during the 1970s and 1980s, fueled by a rapid socioeconomic transformation that cultivated a pious middle class (Jamal 2006). The 1979 Iranian revolution facilitated the diffusion of this social transformation. During this period, support for secular nationalist and socialist ideologies dwindled in the Arab world, while an anti-secular rhetoric and favorable views of an Islamic state became prevalent in the Muslim world (Zubaida 2009). Gradually, a secular-Islamist divide became a noteworthy political dimension, leading to the ascent of Islamist groups in the Arab world and beyond (Kurzman and Naqvi 2010). Particularly, the ideas of Sayyid Qutb gained substantial traction, bolstered by the organizational strength of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (El-Ghobashy 2005) and serving as a source of inspiration for Islamist political parties worldwide.

The Arab Spring marked a critical turning point for political Islamism, with Egypt and Tunisia witnessing the first significant electoral successes of Islamist groups amid transition to democracy. However, these gains were later nullified by military and civilian coups. Turkish Islamists capitalized on the Arab Spring, presenting Muslim democracy as a viable model for the Arab world. Erdoğan frequently used his Islamist credentials, a strategy that presumably

resonated with the pious domestic and foreign audiences and those attached to an Islamist ideology. Turkey established relations with the Muslim Brotherhood or *Ikhwan* parties and related movements in distinct theaters like Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria as a part of its new foreign policy priorities (Taş 2022).

The Turkish model has not received uniform approval in the Arab public sphere, where liberalism, Islamism, and Arab nationalism shape divergent views (Altunışık 2010). Memories of Ottoman imperialism coexist with admiration for Turkey's developmental model, secularism, and its experiment with Muslim democracy, producing competing narratives about what Turkey represents and what Erdoğan stands for (Altunışık 2010). Some view Turkey favorably because of its secular and democratic features (Ciftci and Tezcür 2016), though the same factors can provoke resentment when perceived as failing (Tuğal 2016).

In this complex environment, religion becomes a powerful resource for image building in Arab-majority societies, shaping how both the leader and the nation are received. Therefore, Erdoğan's image building featured performative piety with the dissemination of images showing him reciting the Qur'an and praying in public. Yet, this strategy was not solely inspired by ideological affinities but rather driven by realist, interest-based calculations concerning Turkish economic and security gains in MENA (Altunışık 2010; Tuğal 2016; Taş 2022).

While Erdoğan's stance on global Islamic issues resonates with religious and Islamist voters at home, it also appeals to Arab publics. Interest in Turkish elections across the Arab world illustrates the support he draws from religious individuals and Arab Islamists, who often frame their backing of Erdoğan as a religious duty. They highlight his defense of Islamic values, global Islamic causes, and his role in hosting Islamist dissidents in Turkey (MEMRI, n.d.). Istanbul emerged as a hub for Arab dissidents in the 2010s, as exemplified by Erdoğan's vocal

response to the Khashoggi case (Cunningham and El-Ghobashy 2018). However, after the 2023 elections, Erdoğan appeared more cautious, signaling a shift from earlier alignment with political Islamist movements. Egypt and Gulf monarchies, long wary of Islamism, viewed his earlier positions as threats to regime stability. Erdoğan now navigates a balancing act between boosting Turkey's soft power and economic reach and adjusting to the constraints of regional *Realpolitik*.

The cases of Turkey and Erdoğan imply that the secular-Islamist cleavage in Arab societies should be central to understanding public opinion in the Arab world. This cleavage likely influences the international perception of Erdoğan and his role in shaping Turkish-Arab relations. This division is not solely about a divide between political Islamism and secular political parties. Instead, it reflects deeper schisms in Arab societies regarding the role of Islam in social life, the desire for the implementation of Sharia law, and the influence of religion on politics. This is familiar territory for Erdoğan who exploited religious sensitivities in Turkey by demonstrating his piety, propagating Islamist worldviews, and implementing policies that have increased the public representation of Islam at home. Thus:

Hypothesis 2: Those adhering to an Islamist ideology will be more supportive of Erdoğan's international policies than the secular minded.

Comparative Extensions

Historically, leaders of countries like Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia contended for influence in MENA. Turkey's recent economic growth, foreign policy shift toward the Middle East (Öniş 2014; Altunışık 2010), and the "New Arab Cold War" (Gause 2014) triggered a tripartite competition among Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. In this context, an additional critical division in the region is the Sunni-Shia schism, frequently referenced in the analysis of Middle East

international politics, particularly concerning the ongoing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Gause 2014; Darwich 2016).

Primordialist interpretations trace the roots of sectarianism to the seventh-century inception of Islam, seeing it as a catalyst for contemporary conflicts (Nasr 2022; Abdo 2013). In contrast, instrumentalist perspectives assert that regional powers manipulate sectarianism to achieve security and foreign policy objectives, affording them the means to address regional audiences and cultivate connections with non-state groups in other nations (Gause 2014; Darwich 2016; Nasr 2022). Sectarianism has gained weight in regional foreign policy by introducing securitization, triggering perceived threats, and legitimizing military interventions (Darwich 2016). While the Islamic Revolution and the Arab uprisings were key turning points in the region's sectarian trajectory (Makdisi 1996; Salamey 2009; Gause 2014), the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 was equally pivotal (Barzegar 2008). The removal of Saddam Hussein and the rise of Shia political actors enabled Iran to expand its influence through proxy networks in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

Iran's revisionist foreign policy has strengthened ties with proxy groups. These connections are rooted in the securitization of religious identity (Gause 2014) and the promotion of anti-American sentiment since the 1979 revolution. In contrast to such divisive outlook, a central pillar of Iranian foreign policy has been its pan-Islamist discourse (Barzegar 2010). A cursory analysis of Ali Khamenei's speeches from 2019 and 2020 shows that "Islam" ranks among the three most frequently used terms, a pattern consistent with his framing of transnational Islamic unity.²

Securitization of religious identity creates a dilemma for Iranian foreign policy. On one hand, playing the sectarianism card allows the Iranian leader to expand influence among Shia

minorities and proxy groups. On the other, ambitions for leadership in the Muslim world and the spread of revolutionary ideas require a more inclusive religious strategy to win hearts and minds. It should not come as a surprise that Iran's regional rivals seek to portray it in sectarian terms to isolate it.³ Therefore, Iran's sectarian pragmatism yields strategic gains but undermines its broader ambitions. Shia alliances strengthen Tehran's regional hand yet amplify Sunni fears of a "Shi'a crescent" elsewhere. Meanwhile, Khamenei's pan-Islamic rhetoric likely serves as damage control rather than principled foreign policy (Barzegar 2008). As a result, Iranian leaders must balance sectarianism, Islamism, and revisionism to project a positive image, though this stance also reflects structural constraints next to deliberate strategy.

Traditionally, Saudi Arabia positions itself as the guardian of Islam but also frames the political Islamists as a threat, leading to a unique configuration of foreign policy strategy in the regional tripartite competition. It has leveraged connections with Salafi and non-politicized Sunni groups to counter the influence of both the Muslim Brotherhood and Shia factions throughout the Arab world (Gause 2014). Recently, bin Salman has employed a pragmatic vision that increasingly sidelines religious ideology in foreign policy, representing a post-Salafi turn (Sinani 2022). Notably, in 2014, Saudi Arabia, along with Bahrain and the UAE, declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, an action met with great enthusiasm by the Egyptian government (Abueish 2020). This policy created international tensions between Turkey and some Gulf monarchies, directly exposing the Arab public sphere to an intense regional power competition. Despite their shared aspiration to assume leadership roles in the region, Turkish and Saudi leaders carry divergent preferences concerning political Islam, particularly regarding the Muslim Brotherhood parties. As discussed earlier, Erdoğan explicitly aligns

himself with Muslim Brotherhood groups across the Arab world (Taş 2022), while the Saudis oppose the political Islamist model.

Based on the preceding discussion, *individuals who identify as Shia should hold more favorable views of Khamanei than Erdoğan and bin Salman (Hypothesis 3). Supporters of Ikhwan parties should be more supportive of Erdoğan but less supportive of bin Salman (Hypothesis 4). These proposed effects should amplify views of these countries through the mediating influence of leader favorability in corresponding directions across the Arab world. (Hypothesis 5).*

Data and Analysis

The seventh wave of the Arab Barometer (2021–2022) covers 12 countries, but the prediction sample includes nine (Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Tunisia) due to question availability necessary for testing the hypotheses. This sample spans a broad region, diverse regimes, and includes two countries with sizable Shia populations. The analysis employs causal mediation with multilevel linear regressions to account for the clustered nature of the survey data, with individual observations (level 1) nested within countries (level 2). The two-level model provides efficient estimates of standard errors and considers contextual factors to eliminate potential bias in statistical estimations (Gelman 2006; Goldstein 1987).

Causal mediation analysis systematically explores an explanatory process where one variable, denoted as the treatment (T), influences another variable, either the dependent variable (Y) or outcome, through an intermediary factor (M) (Imai et al. 2011, 768). This framework allows empirical investigation of determinants of attitudes toward a country mediated by the perceptions of its leader among the Arab public and reverse mechanism from country to leader. The central quantities of interest in this context are the population averages of the mediation

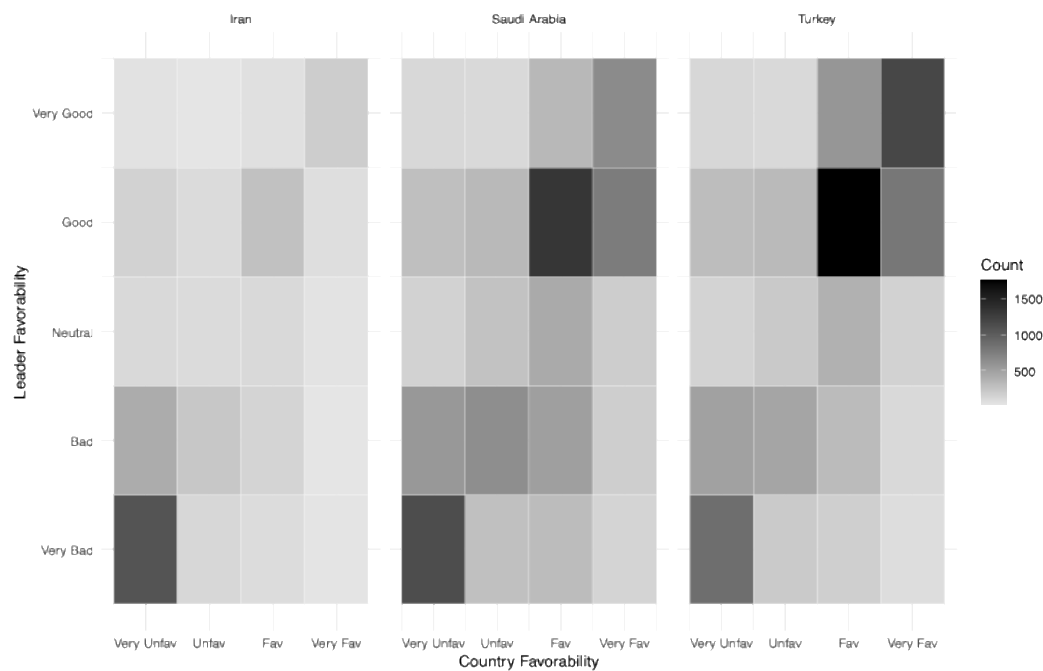
effect, known as the Average Causal Mediation Effect (ACME). In contrast to conventional mediation analyses, causal mediation analysis adopts the potential outcomes framework (Holland 1986; Rubin 1974), which accommodates unobserved heterogeneity pertaining to both observed and counterfactual outcomes (Imai et al. 2011). The analysis relies on the “mediation” package for R (Tingley et al. 2014). The mediator and outcome, attitudes toward a leader and their country, are measured on Likert scales. Although multilevel ordered logit models are theoretically appropriate, current package limitations prevent their use in causal mediation. I therefore estimate multilevel linear regressions, following common practice in similar applications.

Dependent and Mediator Variables

The dependent variable is ‘favorability of a leader’s country’ and the mediator variable is ‘the extent of favorability toward a leader.’ Respondents were asked to express the extent of favorability for different countries in the region using a four-point scale ranging from very unfavorable (1) to very favorable (4). The seventh wave also includes an item asking respondents to assess the impact of certain leaders’ foreign policies on the Arab world using a five-point scale ranging from very bad to very good. The difference in question wording distinguishes general attitudes toward a country, which may reflect long-term perceptions about a higher-order object, from views shaped by a leader’s recent actions or policies. This divergence neither resolves the overlap between the two measures nor does it account for possible question-order effects. However, it allows for a basic conceptual distinction to increase the validity of the measure.

A cursory examination of the data reveals that Erdoğan enjoys a substantial margin of popularity in MENA. In Algeria and Jordan, an impressive 80% of respondents positively view

Erdoğan's foreign policies. Additionally, Erdoğan surpasses leaders like Assad, Khamenei, bin Salman, and bin Zayed in terms of popularity in Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco, and Palestine. However, in Libya, Iraq, and Lebanon, one of the other leaders appears to be more popular than Erdoğan (Appendix, Figure 12). Iraq and Lebanon have relatively large Shia populations, while Turkey has sided with the Government of National Accord against Haftar's forces in Libya. These alignments suggest more heterogeneous public opinion toward the Turkish president in these contexts.



Note: The numbers on both axes show the percentage of respondents who hold favorable views of the leader and the country. Darker colors show stronger correlation. The question about the favorability of Iran was asked in only four countries.

Figure 1: Perceptions of Leaders and Countries in MENA

The heatmap in Figure 1 shows the joint distribution of country and leader favorability for Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Darker areas suggest a strong positive association between the two. For Turkey, responses cluster in the upper-right quadrant, indicating that favorable

views of Erdoğan align with favorable views of the country. Iran shows a more dispersed pattern, with many rating the country positively while giving Khamenei lower scores. In Saudi Arabia, alignment is present but less concentrated than Turkey. These patterns suggest varying degrees of overlap between leader and country evaluations in the Arab world.

Treatment and Control Variables

This study suggests that secular-Islamist and sectarian divides in target countries increase the likelihood of alignment with foreign leaders' preferences. These alignments, in turn, are likely to shape public perceptions of both the leaders and their countries. Given the complex nature of the secular-Islamist divide, the analysis accounts for three dimensions of this concept. To capture religious policy preferences, the analysis uses an item measuring support for laws based on secular, mixed, or Sharia principles (five-point scale). Higher values reflect greater support for Sharia's role in legislation. A second dimension, secular orientation, is measured by a question on preferred religious education in public schools. Coded on a three-point scale, higher values indicate stronger secular preferences (no religious education).⁴ Finally, an item assessing respondents' trust in Islamist parties affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood (*Trust in Islamist Party*) was employed to measure political Islamist ideology. Trust in these Islamist parties, including the Movement of Society for Peace in Algeria, Ennahda in Tunisia, Hamas in Palestine, the Islamic Action Front Party in Jordan, Yemeni Rally for Reform (Al Islah) in Yemen, the National Congress Party in Sudan, the Justice and Construction Party in Libya, and Justice and Development in Morocco, was evaluated on a four-point scale. In Lebanon and Iraq, either this question was not asked, or support for Ikhwan parties was not recorded.

A dichotomous variable was created based on self-identification Shia, representing one of the two major sects in Islam.⁵ The models also account for Muslim religiosity, quantified by an index that averages responses gauging the frequency of reading the Quran and praying Fajr (the morning prayer) on time. Both measures use a five-point scale ranging from “never” to “always.”

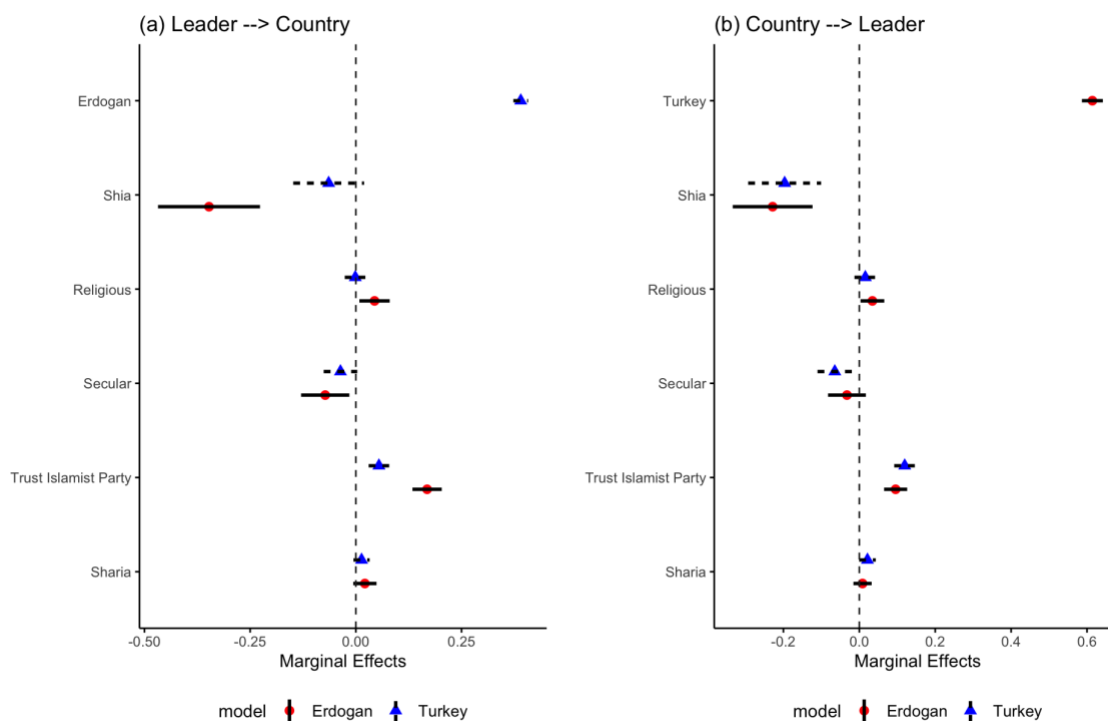
Additionally, the models incorporate a comprehensive set of controls. Social trust is measured by a dichotomous variable where a higher value indicates trust in other people. Interest in politics is measured on a four-point scale, with higher values indicating higher levels of interest. Expectations about the economy are assessed on a five-point scale, with higher values reflecting positive expectations. The models also control for the intention to migrate, with a value of 1 indicating that the respondent considered migrating from home country. Demographic controls consist of respondents’ sex, age, educational status (on a seven-point scale), and whether the respondent is a housewife. Table 1 in the appendix provides a detailed description of the survey items used in the analysis.

Results

Public opinion toward foreign countries and their leaders reflects a hierarchical structure in which general and specific attitudes are correlated but hierarchically ordered (Easton 1957; Canache 1992). A reciprocal association between leader and country favorability is therefore expected. In this context, the observed correlation between the two measures (see Figure 1) may partly stem from the survey structure, where respondents were asked to evaluate the country before assessing the leader. This ordering likely introduces a priming effect, reinforcing the influence of national image on perceptions of the leader. Although the focus of this study is on leadership effects, the absence of experimental controls limits robustness of the proposed effects.

To address this limitation, I report marginal effects in both directions to account for the possibility of reciprocal influence.

Figure 2 presents baseline multilevel models. Panel (a) estimates attitudes toward Erdoğan and Turkey, using Erdoğan's image to predict country favorability. Panel (b) presents the reverse relationship, using country favorability to predict views of Erdoğan.⁶ These models encompass random effects accounting for country intercepts and fixed effects for individual-level covariates. The marginal effects, displayed in Figure 2, depict the average effect of each indicator while keeping other variables constant. The ensuing discussion concentrates on variables that gauge three dimensions of the secular-Islamist cleavage and sectarian identity. Full results are available in the online appendix.



Note: Panel (a) shows the marginal effects of two equations when favorability of Erdoğan is a predictor of favorability of Turkey and panel (b) shows the marginal effects when favorability of Turkey is a predictor of favorability of Erdoğan.

Figure 2: Marginal Effects: Multilevel Regression Analysis of Public Opinion toward Erdoğan and Turkey

In panel (a) Erdoğan's perceived image emerges as a significant predictor of positive attitudes toward Turkey supporting the first hypothesis. However, favorability of Turkey has a more pronounced effect in driving attitudes toward Erdoğan, a finding confirming both the presence of a leadership effect and the effect in the opposite direction. The marginal effects in both panels generally agree but they are attenuated when favorability of Erdoğan or Turkey are included as a predictor in the second equation.

Individuals expressing trust in an Ikhwan party exhibit markedly more positive attitudes, especially about Erdoğan than their perception of Turkey in panel (a). Those favoring Sharia-attentive laws are more inclined toward positive views of Erdoğan and Turkey in both panels, yet these effects lack statistical significance. Conversely, individuals supporting a secular curriculum in public education are less likely to hold favorable attitudes toward Turkey and Erdoğan, particularly the latter in panel (a). In panel (b), the marginal effect for secular orientations lose its statistical significance as a predictor of support for Erdoğan.

The results also indicate that religious individuals tend to lean more favorably toward Erdoğan but not Turkey in both panels. As for sectarianism, those self-identifying as Shia are less likely to favor Erdoğan's policies in the Arab region, and to some extent, Turkey. The magnitude of marginal effects is substantively larger for favorability of Erdoğan than Turkey, especially in panel (a). This effect aligns with lower favorability toward Erdoğan and Turkey in Lebanon and Iraq, where Shia populations are more concentrated. Overall, political Islam matters, as do secularism and religious identity in shaping attitudes toward Erdoğan and Turkey. Positive views of Erdoğan are particularly prevalent among those who trust Ikhwan parties and such attitudes turn strongly negative among those who identify as Shia. While secular attitudes

do not generate positive views of Erdoğan, views about Turkey become favorable in panel (b) even when controlling for favorability of its leader who has increasingly become assertive about his Islamist ideology.

Causal Mediation Analysis

Table 1 displays the Average Causal Mediation Effects (ACME), Average Direct Effects (ADE), and Total Effects (TE) from non-simultaneous multiple treatments, including the variables measuring secular-Islamist cleavage and sectarian identity. The focus is primarily on ACME, revealing the average mediation effect or strength of the mediator variable, perceptions of Erdoğan and favorability of country.

Table 1. Direct and Mediated Effects Turkey and Erdogan

Variable	Source	Effect	Estimate	Lower	Upper	Percent
Sharia	Leader → Country	ACME	0.009	0.018	-0.003	39.23
Sharia	Leader → Country	ADE	0.013	0.037	-0.007	60.77
Sharia	Leader → Country	TE	0.022	0.046	0.002	100
Trust Islamist Party	Leader → Country	ACME	0.066	0.080	0.053	55.284
Trust Islamist Party	Leader → Country	ADE	0.054	0.079	0.026	44.716
Trust Islamist Party	Leader → Country	TE	0.120	0.149	0.091	100
Secular	Leader → Country	ACME	-0.030	-0.005	-0.052	44.3
Secular	Leader → Country	ADE	-0.038	0.003	-0.073	55.7
Secular	Leader → Country	TE	-0.068	-0.031	-0.109	100
Shia	Leader → Country	ACME	-0.137	-0.099	-0.173	71.629
Shia	Leader → Country	ADE	-0.054	0.022	-0.138	28.371
Shia	Leader → Country	TE	-0.191	-0.100	-0.277	100
Sharia	Country → Leader	ACME	0.013	0.025	-0.002	63.554
Sharia	Country → Leader	ADE	0.008	0.030	-0.017	36.446
Sharia	Country → Leader	TE	0.021	0.049	-0.011	100
Trust Islamist Party	Country → Leader	ACME	0.073	0.091	0.056	43.26
Trust Islamist Party	Country → Leader	ADE	0.096	0.128	0.066	56.74
Trust Islamist Party	Country → Leader	TE	0.169	0.209	0.137	100
Secular	Country → Leader	ACME	-0.043	-0.019	-0.076	56.991
Secular	Country → Leader	ADE	-0.033	0.024	-0.072	43.009
Secular	Country → Leader	TE	-0.076	-0.007	-0.137	100
Shia	Country → Leader	ACME	-0.119	-0.076	-0.167	34.123
Shia	Country → Leader	ADE	-0.231	-0.137	-0.331	65.877
Shia	Country → Leader	TE	-0.350	-0.245	-0.468	100

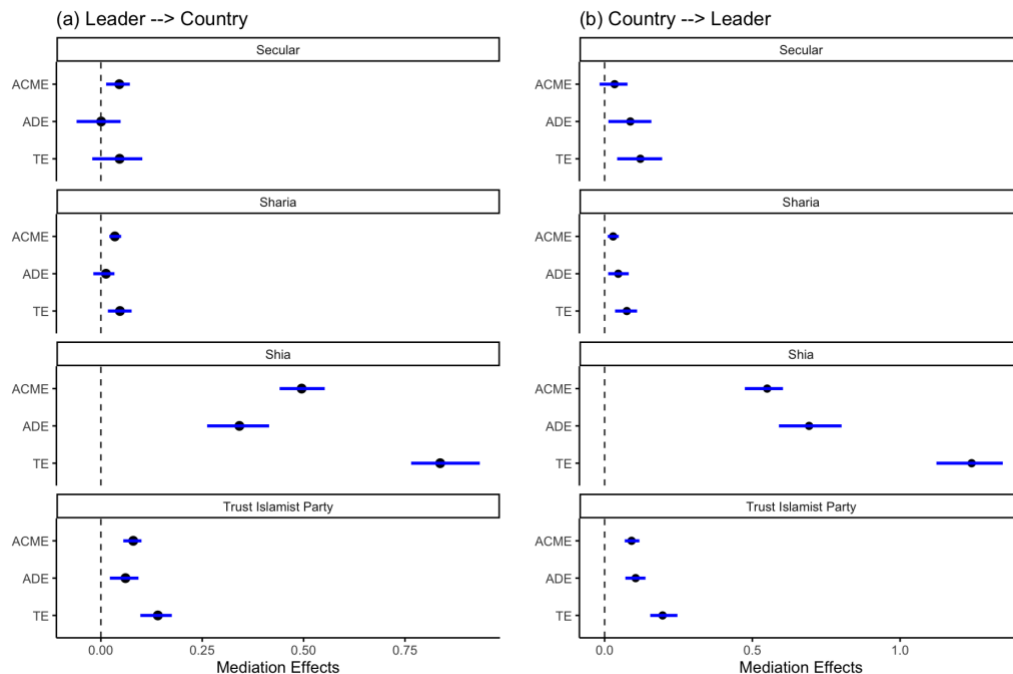
The ACMEs are very similar in both panels with slight variations in the magnitude of effects. The impact of trust in an Islamist party on favorable views of Turkey is magnified when an individual also holds a positive image of Erdoğan, underscoring the robust mediating effect. Specifically, average causal mediating effect (0.067) explains 55 % of the total effect (0.12). The ACME of trust in an Islamist party via favorable views of Turkey on attitudes toward Erdoğan is modest, 45 percent (0.077 out of a total effect of 0.17). Support for Sharia-based legislation does not yield a significant ACME in the leader-to-country model, but favorable views of Turkey slightly amplify its effect on Erdoğan's favorability (0.013/0.023). In contrast, secular individuals are less likely to view Turkey positively, with 43 percent of this effect mediated by negative opinions of Erdoğan. In the reverse model, 54 percent of the effect on Erdoğan's favorability is mediated by negative views of Turkey. These estimates are smaller than the mediated effects of both Islamist party trust and Shia identity. As expected, Shia identity decreases positive views of both Turkey and Erdoğan, with mediation effects playing a central role (67 percent (-0.13 out of -0.19) in panel (a), and 35 percent (-0.125 out of -0.357).⁷

Results of Comparative Extensions

Overall, the results from the preceding analysis about perceptions of Erdoğan and Turkey affirm the theoretical insights regarding the influence of leaders on shaping attitudes toward their respective countries (*Hypothesis 1, Hypothesis 5*). The findings also support the second hypothesis: positive perceptions of Erdoğan among Islamist party supporters increase favorability toward Turkey. His image also mediates negative Shia views of Turkey, more strongly than country perceptions shape views of Erdoğan.

An important empirical question is whether these patterns hold true for other leaders in the region. As noted above, leader and country images are not fixed. They vary over time, and generalizations based on sectarian identity or political Islamism may not apply uniformly. While Iran has used sectarianism to expand regional influence through proxy groups, its leadership continues to project a global Islamic message, creating tension between ideology and strategic policy. Bin Salman's post-Salafi turn and secularizing reforms similarly challenge assumptions about Saudi Arabia's traditional and sectarian role. Still, amid ongoing regional rivalries, divisions along secular-Islamist and ideational lines remain salient, especially among those with strong sectarian attachments. In this context, public attitudes toward Khamenei and bin Salman offer plausible cases for assessing whether insights from the Turkish case travel beyond it.

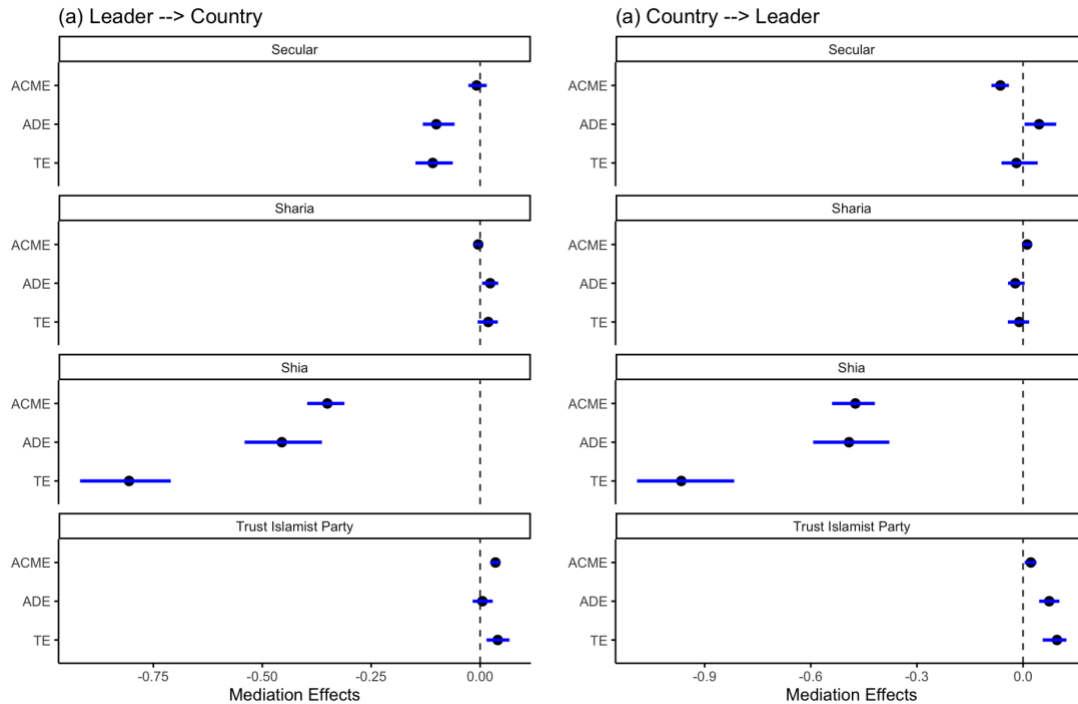
To assess the generalizability of the results from the Turkish case, I leverage survey questions pertaining to perceptions of the Iranian supreme leader and the Saudi crown prince in the seventh wave of the Arab Barometer. These additional models employ the same specifications as the previous analysis. I only focus on causal mediation effects in Figures 4 and 5. Full results and marginal effects are presented in the online appendix. The question about the favorability of Khamenei and Iran was asked only in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine, resulting in a smaller sample size.



Note: Panel (a) reports mediation effects using Khamenei's favorability to predict views of Iran; panel (b) reverses the direction.

Figure 3: Average Direct and Causal Mediation Effects: Iran and Khamenei

The results in Figure 3 show that Shia identity is the strongest predictor of support for both Iran and Khamenei. The mediated effect of Shia identity via perceptions of Khamenei accounts for 60 percent of its total effect on Iran's favorability (0.50 of 0.84). In the reverse model, the effect via country favorability explains 44 percent of total influence on Khamenei but is larger in magnitude (0.55 of 1.2). Sharia preference and trust in an Islamist party also yield significant ACMEs in positive direction, though their magnitudes are modest. Still, these effects account for a greater share of total influence in the leader-to-country direction, suggesting that perceptions of Khamenei more strongly amplify the effect of these variables on attitudes toward Iran than the reverse.



Note: Panel (a) reports mediation effects using bin Salman's favorability to predict views of Saudi Arabia; panel (b) reverses the direction.

Figure 4: Average Direct and Causal Mediation Effects: Saudi Arabia and bin Salman

Figure 4 shows that Shia identity has the largest effects attitudes toward both Saudi Arabia and bin Salman. In the leader-to-country model, the mediated effect accounts for 44 percent of the total effect (-0.35 of -0.81), and 49 percent in the reverse model. Trust in an Islamist party is significantly mediated in both models, accounting for 87 percent of the total effect in the leader-to-country model and 23 percent in the reverse direction. These results indicate that favorable views of bin Salman more strongly amplify the effect of Islamist trust than the reverse. Secular orientation shows no significant mediation in panel (a). Although effect sizes are smaller than in the Iranian case, bin Salman's image still mediates ideological effects on views of Saudi Arabia.

Robustness Analyses

The current version of the mediation package does not support the estimation of multilevel causal mediation analysis with categorical response and mediator variables. To check the robustness of the findings and conduct sensitivity analysis, I ran additional statistical models. Since the dependent and mediator variables are measured on a likert scale, the statistical models were replicated using multilevel ordered logistic regression, maintaining the same model specifications as in the baseline models. The results do not change in these models as reported in the online appendix.

To further validate the reliability of the results, linear regression models incorporating country fixed effects were employed for conducting sensitivity analysis. This method scrutinizes the potential violation of critical assumptions in causal models, particularly assessing the reliance on assumptions such as the absence of pre-treatment confounders for the treatment and mediator (i.e., the sequential ignorability assumption) (Imai et al. 2011, 766). The results of the sensitivity analysis moderately confirm the robustness of the findings against potential violations of the causal identification assumptions for Islamist party trust and Shia identification (Figures 4-7 in the online appendix). Secular orientations and preference for sharia, however, show low robustness, indicating that mediation effects should be treated cautiously.

I also estimated the models using self-reported Sunni identity, despite limited within-country variation in Sunni-majority contexts. The results remain consistent: Sunni identity increases favorability toward both the leader and the country in Turkey and Saudi Arabia, through direct and mediated effects, while producing strong negative effects for Iran and Khamenei.

Discussion

Evidence from the MENA region confirms the salience of a leadership effect on attitudes toward foreign countries, shaped by Islamist and sectarian appeal. The analysis also identifies a reciprocal “country effect” influencing a leader’s favorability, though leadership cues exert greater influence, particularly in the Turkish case. This pattern generalizes beyond Turkey and its leader but varies in form and intensity. Causal mediation results show that Erdoğan enhances Turkey’s image among Islamists and sharia-minded in the Arab public sphere but diminishes it among Shia respondents. Khamenei, by contrast, strengthens Iran’s image among the Shia, but triggers weaker effects among Islamists. Bin Salman’s influence is more modest than the other leaders and sectarian dynamic harms Saudi Arabia’s standing among Shia publics, more prominently than the other religious divides.

Secular individuals are less likely to view Saudi Arabia and its leader favorably, suggesting that bin Salman’s post-Salafi, reformist agenda does not offset negative perceptions of Saudi Arabia. In contrast, secularism is positively associated with favorability toward Iran, though this effect reverses under certain conditions. This pattern differs from the Turkish case, where secularism predicts unfavorable views, partly mediated by attitudes toward Erdoğan. These results may reflect Iran’s appeal to secular, anti-Western audiences through its revisionist foreign policy and pre-revolutionary civilizational appeal. Turkey’s recent Islamist turn in foreign policy might have eroded secular appeal of Turkey in the presence of a strong Erdoğan effect.

Turkish President Erdoğan strives to cultivate an image as a devout leader and defender of Islamic values at home. The results show that this image also resonates in the Arab public sphere, where positive views of Erdoğan among Islamists boost favorability toward Turkey,

more so than similar effects for Khamenei or bin Salman. However, caution is warranted against assuming strong ideological or organizational ties among the loosely connected parties often grouped under the Ikhwan label. Attitudes toward foreign leaders vary among Islamist party supporters and their effect on attitudes may be moderated by perceived ideological proximity between the leader and their own views.

Both ideological cleavages and religious identity shape attitudes toward regional leaders, presumably due to people drawing on familiar cognitive frames in forming views of foreign countries. Iran, more than Turkey or Saudi Arabia, has effectively translated sectarian alignment into both hard and soft power by building tactical alliances with Shia groups but also using Khamenei's appeal as the leader of the Muslim world (Barzegar 2010; Gause 2014; Darwich 2016). The alliances with proxy groups generate local influence, particularly in Iraq and Lebanon, but also trigger Sunni backlash and may erode Tehran's foreign policy seeking pan-Islamic legitimacy (Barzegar 2008; Nasr 2022). Thus, Khamenei faces a strategic paradox: sectarianism is a structural response to geopolitical constraints that generates short-term gains at the cost of broader credibility in the Arab world.

In the realm of attitudes in MENA, the multifaceted competition involving Islamist ideology and sectarianism likely fosters ambivalence among ordinary people as they draw upon familiar ideological frameworks to form opinions about foreign entities. It is this ambivalence that possibly grants Iranian leaders an advantage over Saudi Arabia and the Turkish leader over other leaders in exploiting certain religious divides to win hearts and minds in the region, complementing hard power strategies. This dynamic becomes more complex under authoritarian and semi-authoritarian conditions. In such contexts, admiration for foreign leaders reflects symbolic identification more than political endorsement. Erdoğan's popularity during 2009–2013

represented an emotional alignment with his performance of Islamic defiance and acting as the champion of the Palestinian cause, rather than a concrete endorsement of Turkish policy. Publics in authoritarian settings may engage charismatic figures as proxies for imagined alternatives. These symbolic affiliations contribute to transnational religious discourse and soft power, not necessarily efficacy in foreign policy.

Conclusion

This study draws on the expanding literature on leadership in international relations to explain how foreign leaders are received in MENA and whether their image shapes attitudes toward their respective countries. It focuses on leaders' appeal related to religiously driven domestic cleavages like Islamism and sectarianism in shaping regional public opinion. Causal mediation analysis of survey data confirms the presence of a leadership effect in mediating the influence of religious divides on national image of regional contenders. The analysis also detects the salience of reverse dynamic, where a country's broader image influences perceptions of its leader. Nonetheless, the leadership effect remains a distinct and consistent predictor of attitudes toward the leader's country.

The secular-Islamist divide and sectarian identities function as cognitive filters through which Arab publics evaluate foreign actors, shaping how leadership messages are received and interpreted. The words and actions of foreign leaders may serve as short-cuts or cues helping the target audiences to develop attitudes about foreign objects. These dynamics are central to understanding soft power competition in the contemporary Middle East. This study demonstrates the salience of religious ideology and identification as key mechanisms linking foreign leaders to regional audiences. These frames and leader cues are not static as leaders adjust their discourses as political and religious dynamics shift. In the age of populism and in authoritarian contexts,

leaders may prioritize symbolic appeal over long-standing diplomatic alignments to advance foreign policy goals. As such, understanding how leaders employ religious and cultural narratives to shape foreign public opinion remains a promising area for future research in MENA and beyond.

This study only begins to explore a broader research agenda with potential for wider application. Insights into how leaders exploit ideological divides and religious identities call for analyses of leader personality, leadership traits, religion, and public opinion among foreign audiences. A key limitation is the absence of global public opinion data, which is necessary to rigorously test the attitude projection mechanism centered on leader image. Another limitation lies in the shifting nature of international priorities, which may alter the relevance of some factors identified here. While this study builds its theoretical insights on the findings of experimental studies, it relies on observational data. Future research would benefit from experimental designs that isolate the influence of religious cleavages and assess how leaders shape international opinion through appeals to foreign publics.

Notes:

¹ Notably, Turkish television dramas have garnered massive regional audiences, portraying modern Muslim lifestyles and secular–religious coexistence. Estimates put the viewership of a popular series, *Gümüş (Noor)*, at about 85 million viewers between 2005 and 2007. (Omid 2021).

² These speeches coincide with the period preceding and during the Arab Barometer Wave 7 fieldwork. Frequency data are provided in the online appendix. Speeches are available in English

here: <https://english.khamenei.ir/service/Speeches> . Descriptive charts of word frequency usage by Khamenei and Erdoğan are provided in the online appendix.

³ I am indebted to a colleague who helped me better understand the role of sectarianism in Iranian foreign policy.

⁴ A split sample within the survey included questions on religious influence of clerics on political office, private practice, and voter behavior, but did not overlap with the items used to measure the dependent or mediator variables.

⁵ The sectarian identity item included “just a Muslim” option, which many selected in Sunni-majority countries. Including this response creates perfect collinearity between Sunni identification and country dummies, so the analysis focuses on Shia identification. Models controlling for self-identified Sunnis yield similar results.

⁶ I also ran structural equation models for the simultaneous effects. The results of these models confirm the two-way correlation and are presented in the online appendix.

⁷ The ACME, DE, and total effects (TE) from the models presented in Figures 2-3 and the associated percentages are presented in the online appendix.

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