

International | Champion of the umma

Who speaks for the Muslim world?

There are many contenders, but Turkey's president leads the pack

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WHETHER SPEAKING to a small group or a mass rally, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey's president, often appears to have a bigger audience in mind than the people right in front of him. A talk he gave in mid-February, on the eve of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month, seemed addressed in parts not to the 80 provincial governors who had convened at his palace in Ankara, but to the world's nearly 2bn Muslims. "May the *umma* not be crushed by the divisions that have lasted for ages," he said, referring to the global community of Muslims. "If only we cling tightly to our brotherhood, to our brothers, to our faith and to our dreams, then, by the permission of Allah, there will be no trap we cannot break."

The *umma* has no spokesperson. Since the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632, the Muslim world has not had an undisputed leader or paramount religious authority. Like Buddhism or Christianity, it is divided not only into many nationalities, but also many sects. Most Muslims do not share a common language, even though many learn the Koran in Arabic. Mr Erdogan was speaking Turkish—a language understood by only a small sliver of Muslims. The idea that an "imagined Muslim public" is clamouring for someone to speak on its behalf is a fiction, says Cemil Aydin of the University of North Carolina.

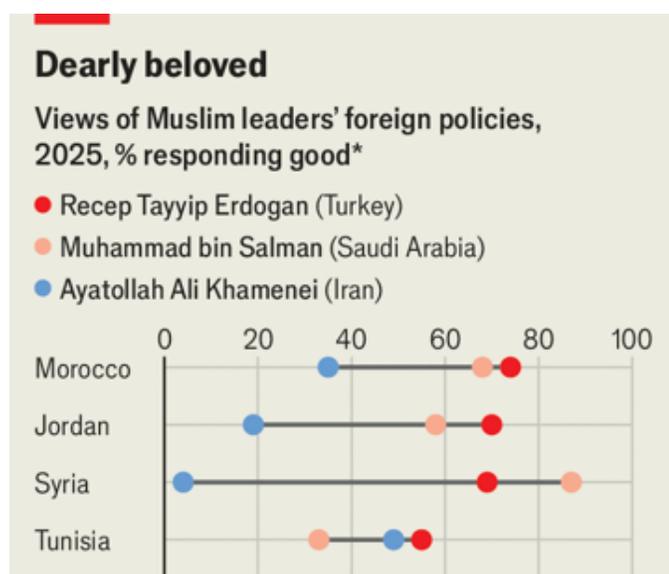
Testing, testing

Yet a few politicians seem to be auditioning for the job. Mr Erdogan has gained a following abroad, and appealed to devout voters at home, by taking up the cause of downtrodden Muslims around the world. Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, goes further, casting himself as a leader of resistance to the oppression of Muslims. Others, such as Muhammad bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's crown prince, emphasise modernity and moderation, rather than religious zeal. All have their followings—and their detractors. But new survey data from Arab Barometer, a research network, and other polling, suggest that Mr Erdogan's approach is the most appealing to Muslims around the world.

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Mr Khamenei often casts today's struggles in sacred hues. As an American armada massed off Iran's shores, he wore a ring to a scriptural study group inscribed with a Koranic verse recalling Moses's deliverance from the mighty Pharaoh and the drowning of the vast and godless Egyptian army in the Red Sea. But Mr Khamenei, a Shia, has relatively little influence among Sunnis, who make up between 85% and 90% of the world's Muslims. What is more, the Iranian regime's frequent, violent repression of protests at home has diminished his appeal. Even fellow Shias, in countries like Lebanon and Iraq, seem to be cooling on the ageing ayatollah.

Some Sunnis see Ahmed al-Sharaa, Syria's rebel-leader-turned-president, as a more credible defender of their faith. He led an Islamist insurgency against the largely secular regime of Bashar al-Assad, so his religious convictions are not in doubt. In fact, by overthrowing a regime backed by Shia Iran and by defeating militias representing minority sects such as Alawites and Druze, Mr Sharaa has delighted many in Syria's Sunni majority. Lots of Sunnis in Lebanon and Iraq, who worry their Shia compatriots will sideline them politically, are also thrilled by his success. According to unpublished recent polling, Mr Sharaa commands broad support in Jordan and Saudi Arabia as well.



Mr Sharaa's youth, his natty dress sense and his unusual mix of Islamism and pragmatism may all be bolstering his popularity. So, too, may his novelty. But the near-impossible task of patching up a physically devastated and politically divided country on a shoestring budget may quickly sully his reputation.

Prince Muhammad is also a young

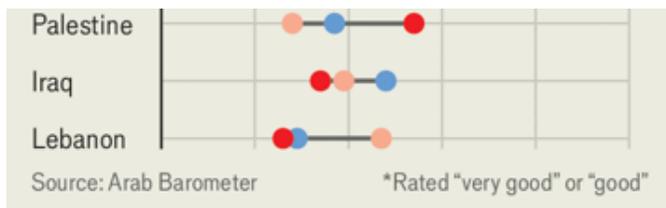


CHART: THE ECONOMIST

leader presiding over rapid change—with vastly greater resources. Although he is reviled by many Westerners for his role in the murder of a Saudi journalist, he is a much more popular figure around the Muslim world. Fully

87% of Syrians, 68% of Moroccans and 58% of Jordanians have a positive opinion of the his role in the region, according to Arab Barometer (see chart). Of the 12 world leaders the Lowy Institute, an Australian think-tank, asked Indonesians about in 2021, he was the most popular, with 57% of respondents expressing confidence that he would “do the right thing” in world affairs.

More sporty than spiritual

Prince Muhammad does not spend much time talking about religion. Unlike previous Saudi rulers who trumpeted their role as custodians of Mecca and Medina, the two holiest sites in Islam, he shows little interest in religious or moral leadership. He never claims to speak for the *umma*, analysts say, or to pose as the champion of oppressed Muslims. He is popular within Saudi Arabia for loosening religious strictures and promoting secular pastimes such as music and sport.

On the bombing and blockade of Gaza, an emotive topic throughout the Muslim world, the prince has been extremely circumspect, trying not to whip up public opinion in Saudi Arabia or elsewhere. “When he engages religion, it’s more in the vein of emphasising the importance of moderation and pluralism and coexistence,” says Peter Mandaville, author of “The Geopolitics of Religious Soft Power”. “But in terms of his global profile, he is more excited about things like venture capital, innovation and glitzy conferences.”

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Mr Erdogan, in contrast, seldom passes up an opportunity to denounce Israel’s

conduct in Gaza. His government has issued arrest warrants for much of Israel's cabinet on charges of genocide and crimes against humanity. He was similarly outspoken in his support for the Arab spring in 2011. Indeed, that is when his popularity in the Arab world appears to have peaked, although it remains high.

Arab Barometer's data suggest that Mr Erdogan has long been the most popular leader in the Middle East. He also seems to be well-liked in other parts of the Muslim world, although the polling is thinner. A survey by Gallup in 2017 put Mr Erdogan's net favourability in Indonesia and Pakistan, the two most populous of the world's roughly 50 Muslim-majority countries, at +45 and +27, respectively. Support for Mr Erdogan is also widespread in the Turkic world, which stretches from Azerbaijan to Xinjiang, in western China, and among Muslims in Europe, including the 4m or so people of Turkish origin living in France, Germany, and the Netherlands.

When Mr Erdogan visited Pakistan in 2020, its prime minister at the time, Imran Khan, quipped that Mr Erdogan was so popular there he could "clean sweep" a Pakistani election. Mr Assad, the bloodthirsty Syrian despot Mr Sharaa recently overthrew, is said to have once joked that Mr Erdogan was more popular in Syria than he was—a statement that was almost certainly true.

At first blush, Mr Erdogan's popularity is surprising. Turkey is a secular state and its president has no religious authority, although Mr Erdogan has made a career of opposing doctrinaire secularism and championing Turkey's pious heartlanders over its urban elite. What is more, his record is chequered: he has hollowed out Turkey's democracy, locking up political opponents, cowing the media and purging the bureaucracy and armed forces of suspected enemies. He has also mismanaged the economy, presiding first over runaway inflation and now over punishing interest rates intended to curb it. His popularity within Turkey has been waning.

Mr Erdogan's foreign admirers are apparently willing to overlook his misguided policies and growing authoritarianism. Much of their admiration may in fact stem from the perception of Turkey as a prosperous democracy with close ties to Europe—all qualities that Mr Erdogan has undermined, notes Gonul Tol of the Middle East Institute, an American think-tank.

Travelling salesman

TRAVELING SPOKESMAN

Yet there is also substance to Mr Erdogan's appeal. His longevity in office (he has run Turkey for over 20 years, first as prime minister and then as president) has given him the opportunity to visit almost every Muslim-majority country, including war-torn places like Afghanistan. When he went to Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, in 2011, he was the first leader from outside Africa to visit in nearly 20 years. Even minuscule spots like Brunei and Kosovo have not been forgotten. It presumably helps that Turkish firms are big investors in much of Africa and Central Asia, among other places. Mogadishu teems with Turkish aid workers, businesspeople, and teachers.



PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY IMAGES

Mr Erdogan is willing not just to show up, but also to take up causes dear to these places, positioning himself as a spokesman for the Muslim world's grievances. On that visit to Somalia, he called for more to be done to relieve a deadly famine. While in Pakistan (and on several subsequent appearances at the UN) he criticised India for its conduct in Kashmir, a territory divided between India and Pakistan. In much the same vein, he has inveighed against Islamophobia in Europe, the persecution of the Rohingya in Myanmar and China's mistreatment of its Uyghur minority. "He is seen as a strong and brave leader, standing up to

the West, and speaking on issues close to Muslims,” says Mushahid Hussain, a former Pakistani senator.

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Mr Erdogan cultivates this image, regularly claiming to speak on behalf of Muslims everywhere. “In a multipolar world, the Muslim world needs to become a pole in its own right,” he proclaimed at a meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation last year. “Our biggest problem is lack of unity.”

Mr Erdogan is not exactly a unifier. His government has stoked conflicts all over the Middle East, from Libya to Iraq. But it has also made grand gestures of solidarity, most notably by taking in more than 3m Syrian refugees (not all of them Muslim) during that country’s long civil war. An impressive 69% of Syrians have a positive opinion of Mr Erdogan. More recently Turkey has mooted a defence agreement with Pakistan and Saudi Arabia, which pundits describe as a “Muslim NATO”.

Other leaders, such as Mr Sharaa, may come to rival Mr Erdogan’s popularity. Turkey’s troubles may end up tarnishing his reputation. But as flawed as Mr Erdogan is, he, more than anyone, has the ear of the Muslim world. ■

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