

Saudi Poll: China Leads U.S.; Majority Back Curbs on Extremism, Coronavirus

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Brief Analysis

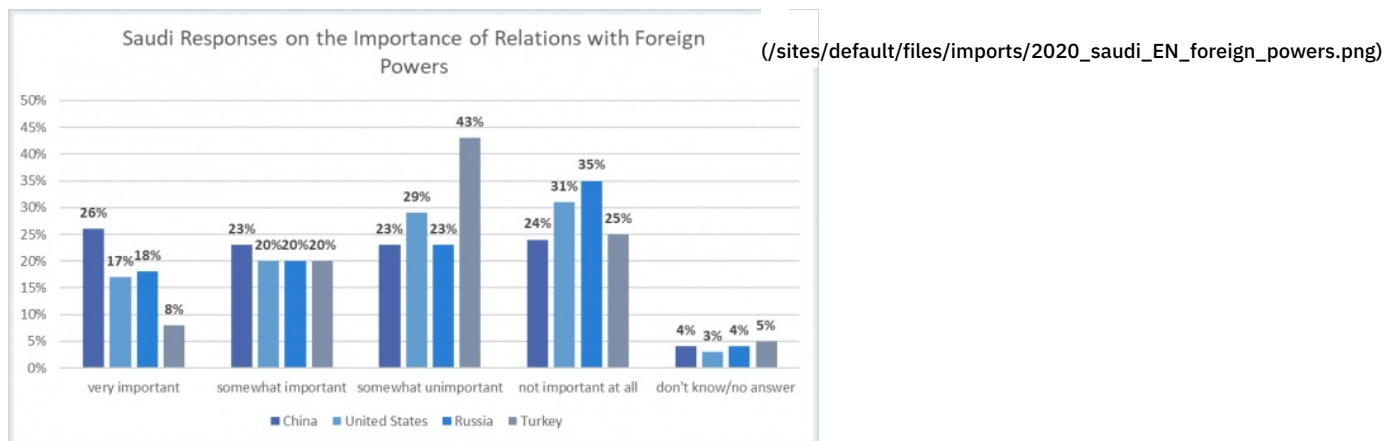
Half of Saudis now say that good ties with China are “important” for their country.

A very rare but highly reliable Saudi public opinion poll, commissioned by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and conducted in person by a regional commercial firm in June, reveals some surprises on key foreign policy issues—but general quiescence on domestic policies, which remain the predominant popular concern.

For the most recent polling data on Saudi Arabia, [click here. \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/correction-new-saudi-poll-shows-sharp-rise-support-israel-ties-despite-caveats\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/correction-new-saudi-poll-shows-sharp-rise-support-israel-ties-despite-caveats)

For the first time since these polls began in 2014, China has clearly passed the United States in Saudi popular preferences. Half (49%) of Saudis now say that good ties with China are “important” for their country, compared with 37% who say the same about the United States.

Russia is currently statistically tied with America.



On this issue, Turkey lags behind, with just 28% saying relations with that country are even “somewhat” important for Saudi Arabia. Even so, considering the acute tensions at the official level between the two countries, that figure represents a substantial minority of the Saudi public who privately differ with the party line. The congruence or incongruence between official and popular views on various other timely foreign policy topics—including Palestine, Qatar, Syria’s Assad regime, and Iran’s former IRGC commander Qassem Soleimani—will be analyzed in a [future separate paper \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/saudi-poll-public-foreign-policy-sunn-shia-2020\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/saudi-poll-public-foreign-policy-sunn-shia-2020).

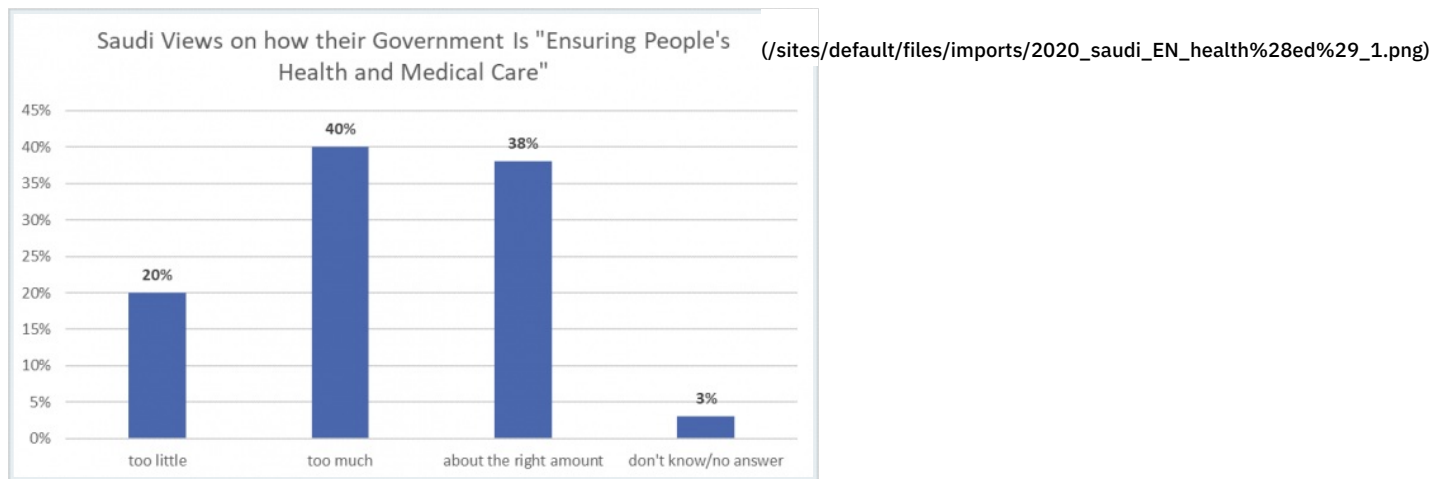
None of these foreign ties, however, appears to be a top priority for the Saudi public, which as in the past is more focused on internal matters. A resounding 84% agree (at least “somewhat”) with this statement: “right now, internal political and economic reform is more important for our country than any foreign policy issue, so we should stay out of any wars outside our borders.” This solid majority includes 39% of Saudis, an unusually high proportion, who say they feel “strongly” that way.

Majority Agree Government Should Prevent Religious Extremism

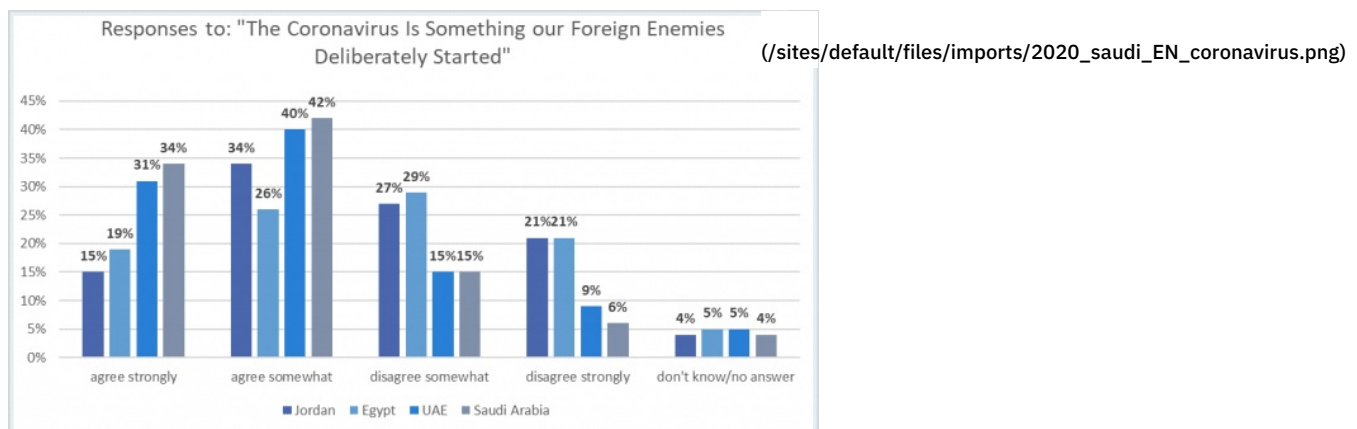
On domestic issues, nearly half (45%) of Saudis say their government is doing “about the right amount” to prevent “religious extremism in our society.” However, 38% say officials are doing “too little.” This mix of answers suggests broad support for measures to curb religious extremism, along with some concern over signs that it remains a problem.

Coronavirus Efforts Get Mixed Reviews; Many See Foreign Conspiracy

Regarding the coronavirus pandemic, attitudes are also mixed, though in a different manner. 38% of Saudis say the authorities are doing about the right amount to “ensure people’s health and medical care.” Yet about the same proportion (40%) call those measures “too much,” signaling some resistance to lockdowns or other restrictions. Surprisingly, a mere 20% say the government is doing too little in this area.



Equally striking is the very large number of Saudis—76%—who think the coronavirus “is something our foreign enemies deliberately started.” Moreover, a third “strongly” agree with this conspiracy theory. These figures are significantly higher than in the other Arab publics polled on this question since February: including Egypt, Jordan, the UAE, the West Bank, and Gaza. The reasons for this result are unclear, but the concomitant increase in positive Saudi views of relations with China suggests that it is not widely blamed for spreading the virus.



Just Half Satisfied with Law and Order Measures; Majority Want More Heed to Public Opinion

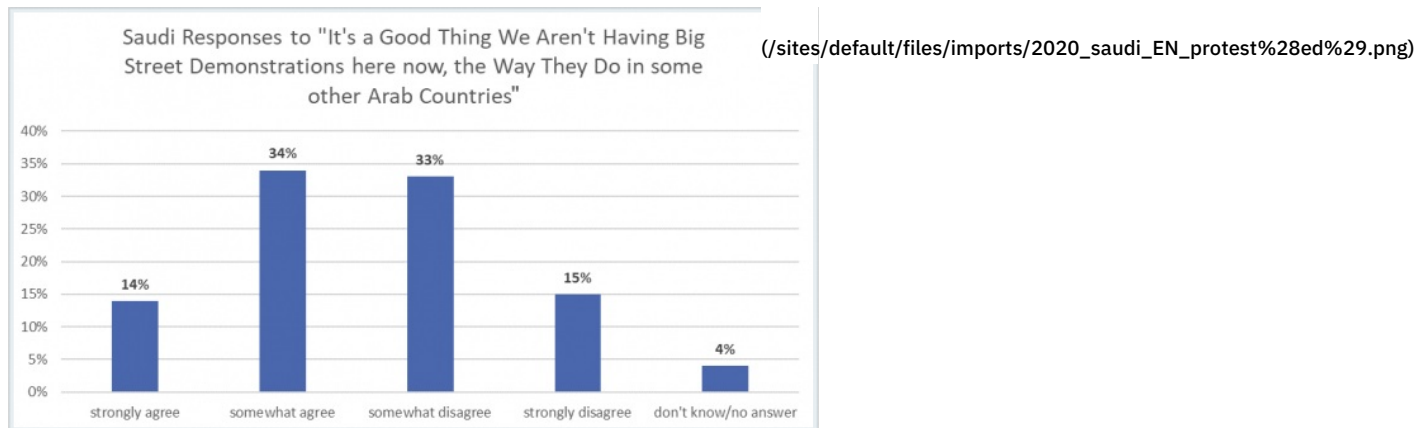
On another salient domestic issue, “maintaining law and order in our public places,” views are also mixed. About half of Saudis, roughly the same proportion as in the other countries polled, say their government is doing about the right amount in this domain. The other half are split: around one quarter say officials are doing “too much” to ensure domestic tranquility, while the remaining quarter say “too little.”

There is one internal issue, though, on which the narrow majority (58%) of Saudis, as in comparable recent Arab surveys elsewhere, seem to agree their government is doing too little: “paying attention to public opinion about its policies.” This resembles the comparatively high proportion in the other three Arab countries just polled. In the Saudi case it is somewhat ironic, as Riyadh has made substantial efforts in recent years—through the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue, social media content analysis, and other methods—to take the pulse of its own public and even take its views into account on various social issues.

But Only One-Quarter See Value in Popular Protests, and Most Feel Relatively Content

Nevertheless, the Saudi populace as a whole takes comfort in its relative advantages, leaning against overt protests. Two-thirds agree that “when I think about what’s happening in Yemen or Syria, I feel that our situation here is not so bad.” The other third of the Saudi public presumably also understand that things are much worse in Yemen or Syria, but that doesn’t make them feel any better.

The public is unexpectedly evenly divided about a related question. Asked if “it’s a good thing we aren’t having big street demonstrations here now, the way they do in some other Arab countries,” exactly 48% agree and 48% disagree, with equal portions feeling either strongly or simply somewhat that way. But when asked further about specific examples, namely “the anti-government protests in Iraq and Lebanon,” a mere 24% of Saudis believe those protests will have even a “somewhat positive” effect.



Methodological Note

These findings are from a face-to-face opinion poll among a representative national sample of 1,000 Saudi citizens, conducted by an experienced and highly reputable commercial survey firm in June 2020. The author is personally well familiar with, and fully confident in, the technical methods, professional management, quality controls, credible assurances of confidentiality, and overall integrity of the fieldwork team. In addition, the author directly supervised the question wording and translation, coding specifications, scheduling adjustments due to coronavirus constraints, and other relevant aspects of the survey.

The sample was selected according to strict, standard geographic probability procedures. For a sample of this size and nature, the statistical margin of error for the total is approximately 3% (with the precise margin depending upon the distribution of responses for particular questions). Additional methodological details are readily available upon request. ❖

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