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New Saudi Poll Shows Just One-Fourth Back Moderate Islam or Count on the United States

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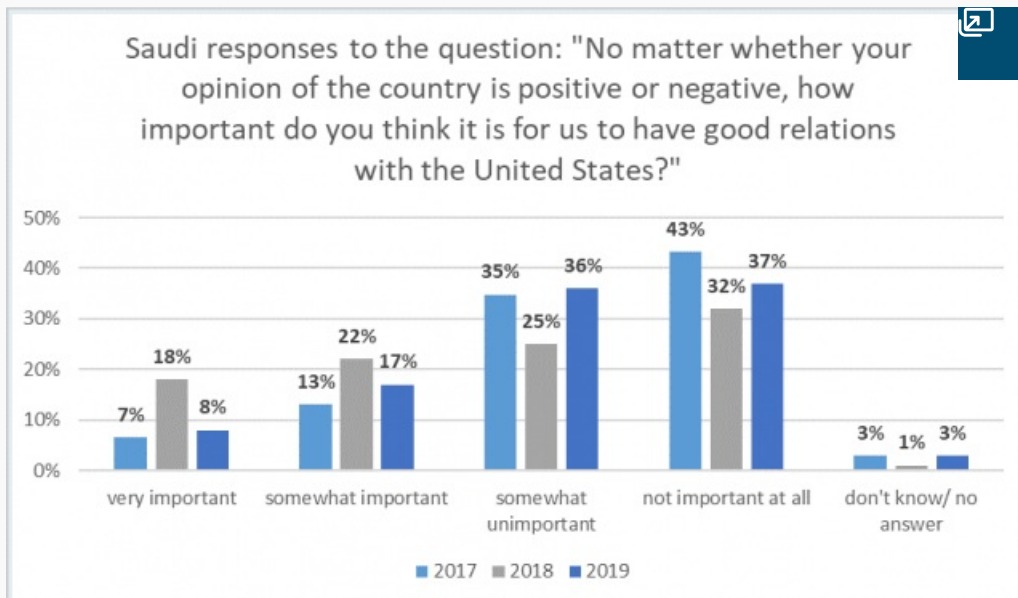
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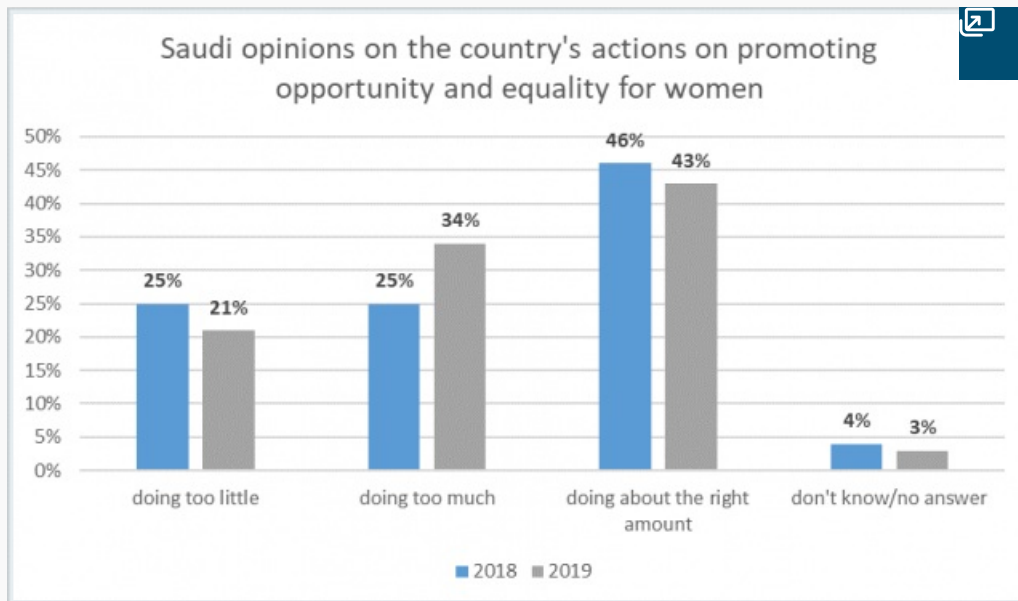
Brief Analysis

The recent terrorist murders by a Saudi cadet at the Pensacola Naval Air Station have revived urgent questions about grassroots Saudi attitudes toward the United States. As luck would have it, new data from a confidential survey conducted inside Saudi Arabia last month provides the answers. And they are not all that reassuring.

Only 25% of Saudi respondents say it is important for their country to have good relations with the United States. By comparison, exactly the same percentage voice that view about relations with Syria. And a notable proportion—36%—now say that good relations with Russia are important.



On sensitive social issues, moreover, the past year has seen some popular backlash against certain government reforms. The majority still say their government should continue its efforts at “promoting opportunity and equality for women,” or even do more in that direction, but that figure has dipped from 71 to 64%. Conversely, the proportion who say Riyadh is doing “too much” about women’s rights has risen a bit, from 25 to 34%.



More ominously, the minority who want to “interpret Islam in a more moderate, tolerant, and modern direction” has dropped five points to just 20%. And the majority who now disagree with a more moderate version of Islam has risen by the same amount, to 77%—including 43% who say they disagree “strongly.” And one-quarter of Sunni respondents continue to express some sympathy for the hardline Muslim Brotherhood organization, even though their own government has outlawed it as a “terrorist” group.

A related, particularly controversial question turns out to be the matter of relations with other religious communities. Surprisingly, nearly two-thirds of Saudi respondents agree at least somewhat with this proposition: “We should show more respect to the world’s Christians, and improve our relations with them.” Yet a mere 5% expressed that sentiment when asked about Jews.

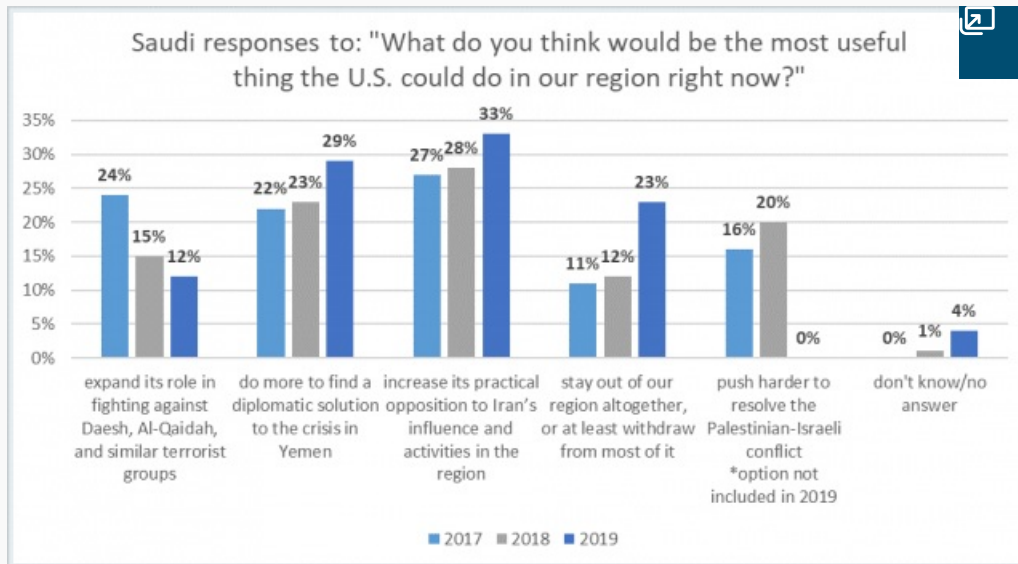
On internal economic issues, attitudes have hardly changed over the past year, again with considerable private grumbling about official behavior. Saudi respondents remain concerned about corruption: around 60%, about the same as a year ago, say their government is doing too little to combat it. Significantly fewer, but still around 40%, say the government is doing too little in “dealing with our growing economic problems and people’s daily hardships,” or in “sharing the burden of taxes and other obligations to the government in a fair manner.”

The good news from this survey is that on a few key foreign policy issues, many Saudis remain inclined to agree with the United States—and with their own country’s policies. Like their government, poll respondents express overwhelmingly negative views toward Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and Hezbollah. Positive views of all three are mired in the single digits. A mere 8% see it as “important” for Saudi Arabia to have good relations with Iran, just 6% have a favorable view of Khamenei, and only 7% say they have a positive attitude toward Hezbollah.

A closer look shows that Saudi Arabia’s roughly 10% Shia minority, clustered in the oil-producing Eastern Province, have more nuanced opinions on these matters. Half of Shia respondents say it is important for their country to have good ties with Iran, and nearly half voice a positive view of Hezbollah. But only 18% have even a “fairly good” opinion of Iran’s Supreme Leader.

There is also some unexpected good news on the difficult question of Palestine and Israel. As in the author’s annual

polls for the previous two years, two-thirds of Saudi respondents agree with this statement: “Arab states should play a new role in Palestinian-Israeli peace talks, offering both sides incentives to take more moderate positions.” Only 22% have a favorable opinion of the Palestinian Hamas movement, which rejects peace with Israel. And the same low proportion, asked to choose from a list of possible priorities for America’s Middle East policy, pick “stay out of our regional altogether, or at least withdraw from most of it.” If the Saudi terrorist in Pensacola voiced a violent grievance against the United States on this score, he did not represent the large majority of his people, at least according to this poll.



Nevertheless, adherence to an intolerant view of Islam, along with dislike or distrust of the United States, remain widespread among the Saudi public. The reforms championed by the Saudi government, as well as its alliance with Washington, are in the interest of both countries. But both governments apparently still have a long way to go in convincing not just the American public, but the Saudi public as well.

The survey was conducted in November by a leading regional commercial market research company, using face-to-face interviews and standard geographic probability sampling methods to yield a representative national sample of 1,000 Saudi citizens. The author personally traveled to the region to consult with the project managers and ensure strict confidentiality and quality controls during the fieldwork period. The statistical margin of error for a sample of this kind is approximately 3%. ❖

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