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Correction: New Saudi Poll Shows Sharp Rise in Support for Israel Ties, Despite Caveats

by [David Pollock](#)

Dec 8, 2020

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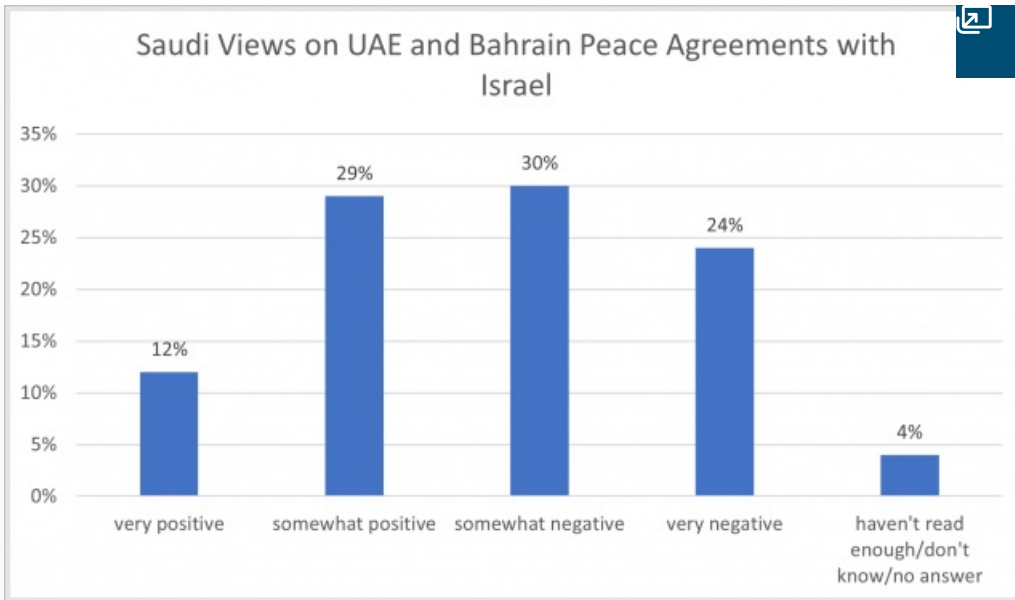
Brief Analysis

New polling data provides a window into popular Saudi views of the Abraham Accords and other foreign policy concerns facing the kingdom.

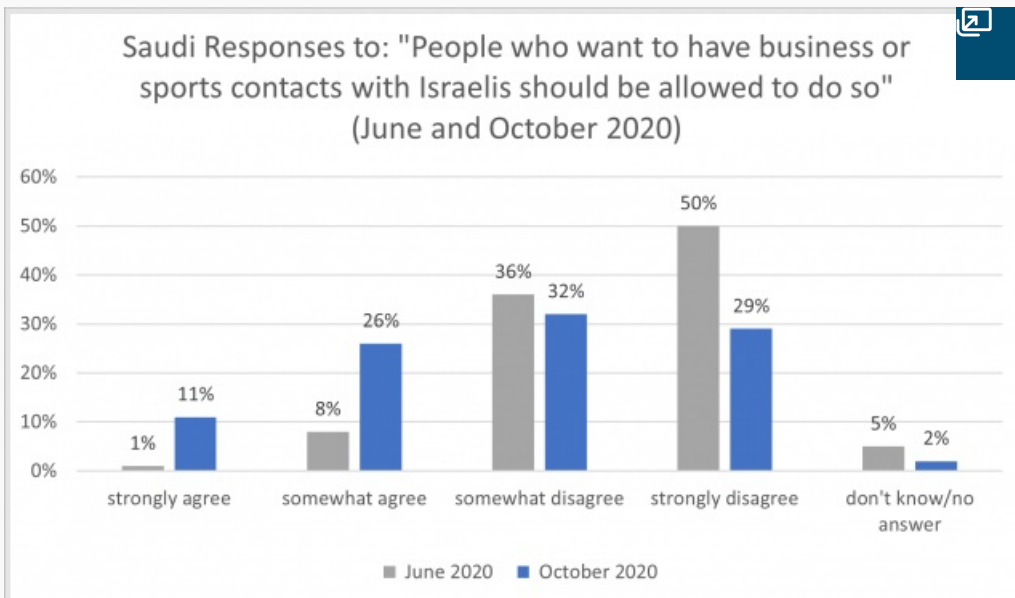
Amidst American and Israeli press reports—and official Saudi denials—of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s recent meeting with Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman in Neom, Saudi Arabia, a reliable new public opinion poll commissioned by The Washington Institute shows that the Saudi public is divided but increasingly open to contacts with Israel. (This corrected version of a November 25 report is based on revised data received from the pollster, after remedying a technical error.)

41% Back UAE/Bahrain Peace with Israel; 37% Back Personal Contacts

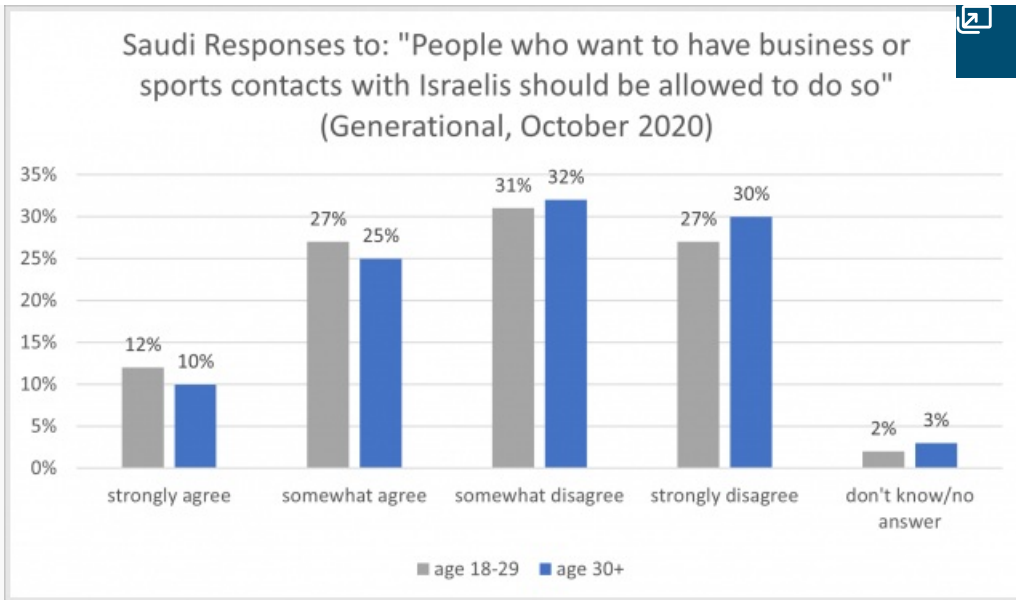
Asked about September’s peace agreements between Israel and the two Saudi neighbors, the [UAE](#) and [Bahrain](#), 41% of the Saudi public call the agreements a “positive development.” A narrow majority (54%), however, label the agreements as negative. The detailed responses are as follows: very positive, 12%; somewhat positive, 29%; somewhat negative, 30%; very negative, 24%; haven’t heard or read enough to say, 1%; don’t know, 2%; no answer, 1%.



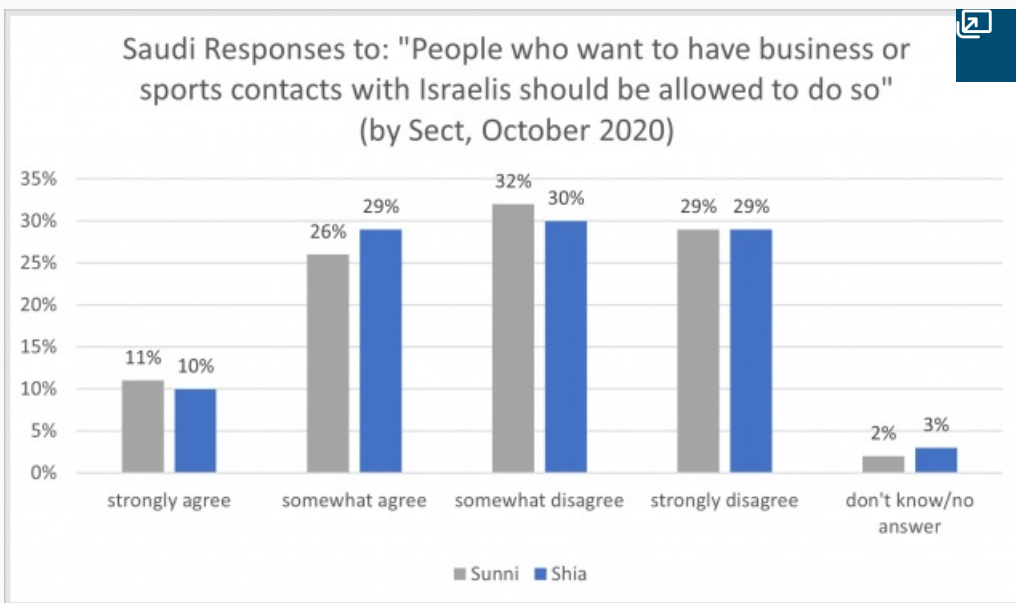
A plurality of Saudis (37%) also agree, either "somewhat" or "strongly," that "people who want to have business or sports contacts with Israelis should be allowed to do so." This is quadruple the proportion who agreed with this statement in the previous survey in June 2020. The rapid growth demonstrates that popular attitudes on this supposedly sensitive point are actually quite fluid, probably responding both to new events and official guidance. Currently, a third of Saudi citizens "somewhat disagree" with this proposition, while the remaining third "strongly disagree." These mixed results, which Saudi officials carefully monitor, illuminate why they cite concerns over internal public opinion to explain their deferral of full normalization with Israel.



Surprisingly, and significantly, business and sports contact with Israelis is neither a generational nor a sectarian wedge issue among the Saudi public. The current responses to these questions show only very modest differences between adults under 30 years of age or over, or between citizens in Saudi Arabia's Sunni majority or Shia minority (around 10% of the population).



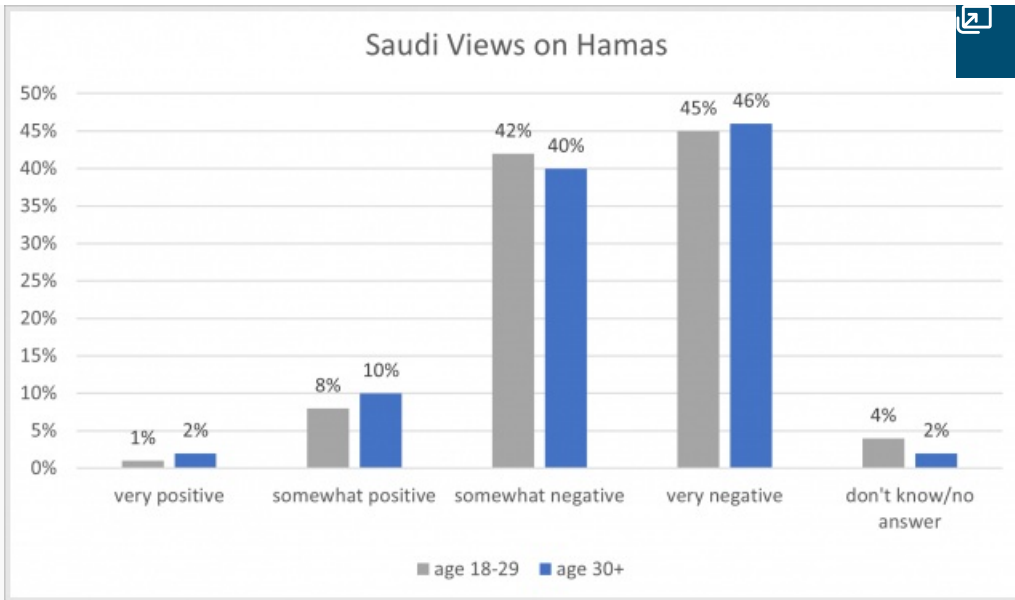
Apparently, even the Saudi “old guard” and the often-marginalized Saudi Shia minority (concentrated in the oil-rich Eastern Province just across the Gulf from Iran) are coming around to this more moderate point of view.



Only One-Fourth Pick Palestine as U.S. Priority; Hamas Plummets to Just 11 Percent Approval

In addition, these views reflect a long-term decline in the salience of the Palestinian issue among the Saudi public. Asked about their top priority for U.S. policy in the region, just over a quarter of Saudis (28%) now select “pushing for a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.” The other choices are roughly evenly distributed as follows: “working to contain Iran’s influence and activities, 25%”; “finding a diplomatic solution to the wars in Yemen and Libya, 19%”; or “providing more economic aid and investment to Arab countries,” 21%.

Furthermore, very little popular sympathy remains among Saudis for Hamas, the Palestinian movement that rules Gaza and rejects peace with Israel. Today, a mere 11% of Saudis report even a “somewhat positive” opinion about Hamas. And that view is even rarer among younger Saudis than older ones.

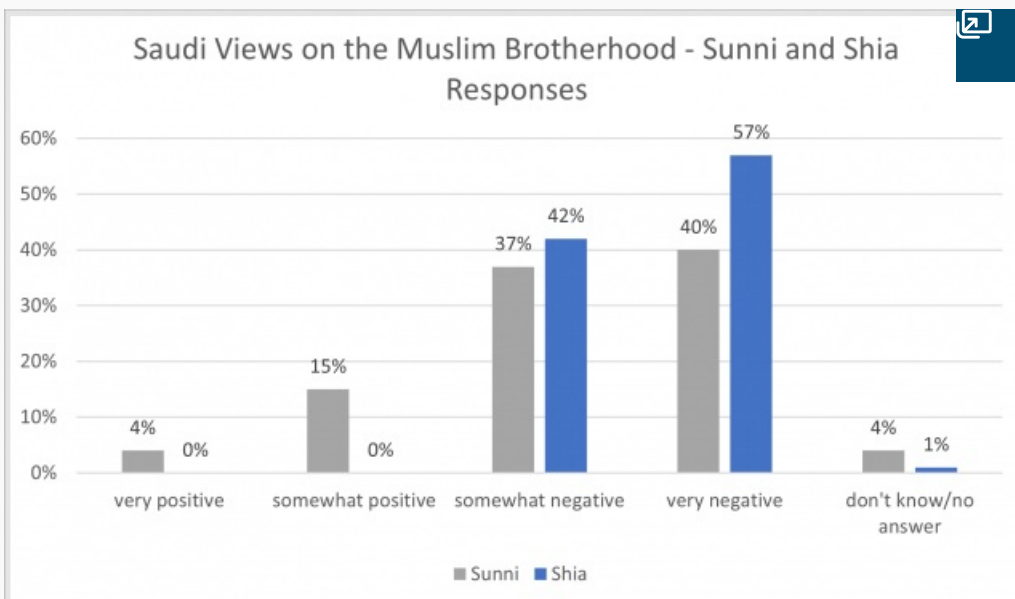


Social Reforms Have Solid Majority Support, But One-Fifth Still Like Muslim Brotherhood

Even more encouraging from the Saudi government’s standpoint is the large majority—72%—who voice a favorable view of “the new rules allowing movies, concerts, and women drivers in Saudi Arabia.” Here again, there are only modest differences between younger and older Saudis: 75% of the younger generation supports these reforms, as do 69% of the older one.

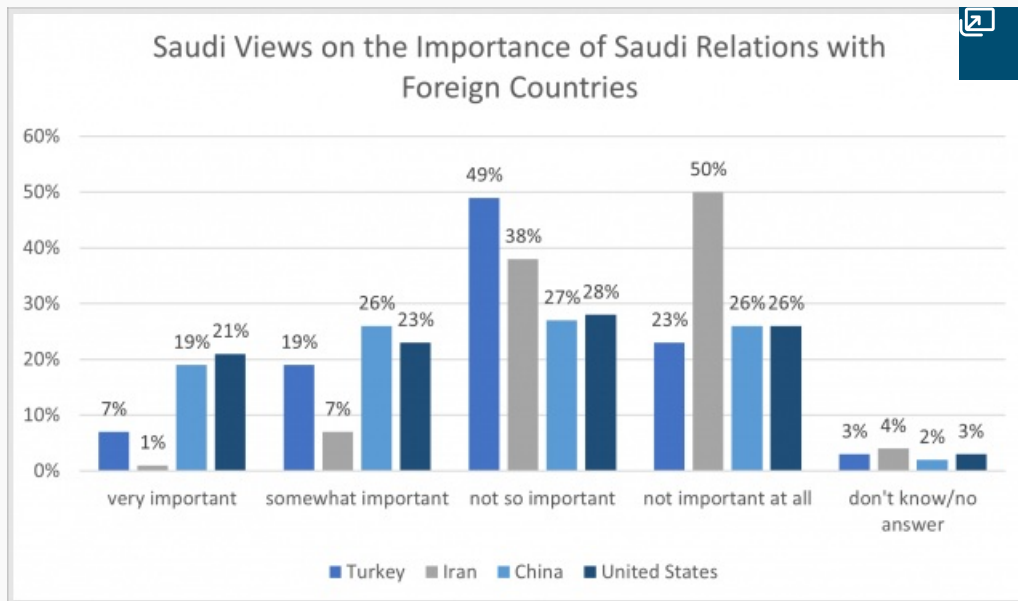
At the same time, the Muslim Brotherhood—which opposes peace with Israel and was outlawed as a terrorist organization in Saudi Arabia several years ago—retains a small measure of private popular sympathy. The proportion of Saudis reporting at least a “somewhat positive” view of that organization stands today at 18%, roughly in line with last year’s poll.

That figure is only marginally higher among the older generation than among the younger one. But this is one question on which the Saudi Shia minority differs from the Sunni majority: no Saudi Shia polled voice even a somewhat favorable view of the Muslim Brotherhood, a militant Sunni movement.



Few Value Ties with Turkey or Iran—Though Majority Want Compromise with Qatar

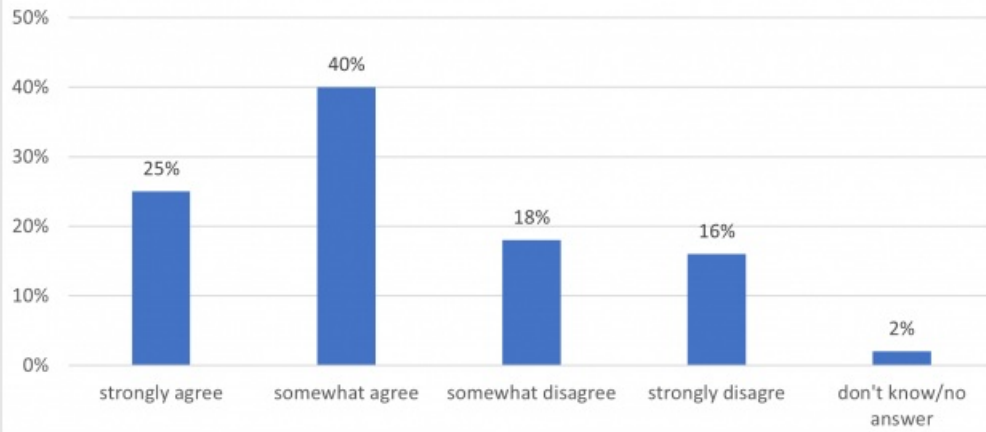
Also broadly in tune with official policy, just 26% of Saudis say it is even “somewhat important” for their country to maintain good relations with Turkey. Here too there are only modest differences between Saudi sects or generations. The comparable figures regarding the importance of good relations with two other major countries are as follows: the United States, 44%; China, 45%.



Significantly, even fewer Saudis (8%) say they value good relations with Iran. Moreover, Saudi Shia are only slightly more likely (13%) to voice that view. On this and other issues related to Iran, including Hezbollah and the Houthis, the Saudi government’s hostile stance enjoys a wide measure of popular support.

That is decidedly not the case, however, concerning the four-year feud with [Qatar](#). The majority of Saudi citizens, unlike their government, clearly believe that “the way to solve the disputes between Qatar and other Arab states is for both sides to come to a compromise.” That high level of readiness for compromise with Qatar has remained consistent during the past four years of official feuding. The willingness of so many Saudis to disagree with their government’s line on this high-profile issue, as recently as early November, adds greatly to the overall credibility of these new survey findings. Since then, rumors suggest that Riyadh may indeed be moving toward some kind of compromise with Qatar—in tune not just with U.S. diplomatic entreaties, but also with Saudi public opinion.

Saudi Responses to: "The way to solve the disputes between Qatar and other Arab states is for both sides to compromise in order to reach an agreement"



Methodological Note

These findings are from a survey conducted October 17-November 9, 2020, by a highly reputable, independent, and apolitical regional commercial market research firm among a representative national sample of 1,000 Saudi citizens. Unlike most other surveys, this poll comprised face-to-face interviews with a true random (geographic probability) sample of the total population, yielding credible results fully in line with the highest international professional standards.

The statistical margin of error for such a sample is approximately 3%; for the two generational subsamples, it is approximately 4.5%. Comprehensive methodological details, including sampling procedures, quality controls, complete questionnaire, and other pertinent information, are readily available upon request. ❖



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