



UAE Public Shifts Toward Peace with Israel—and with Qatar

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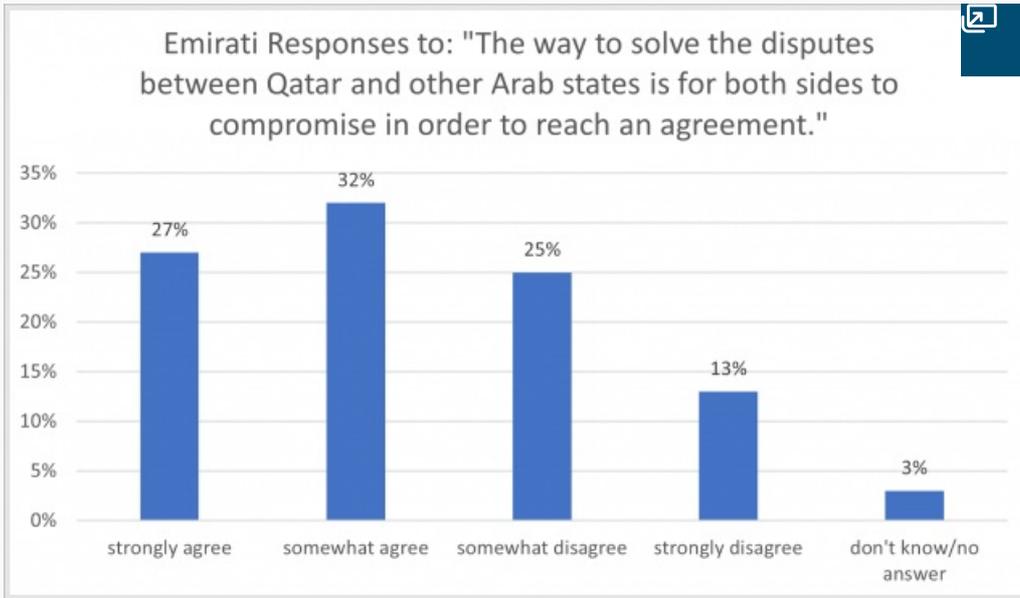


Brief Analysis

November 2020 polling reviews an Emirati public split on major foreign policy questions, from peace with Israel to the U.S. election and the rift with Qatar.

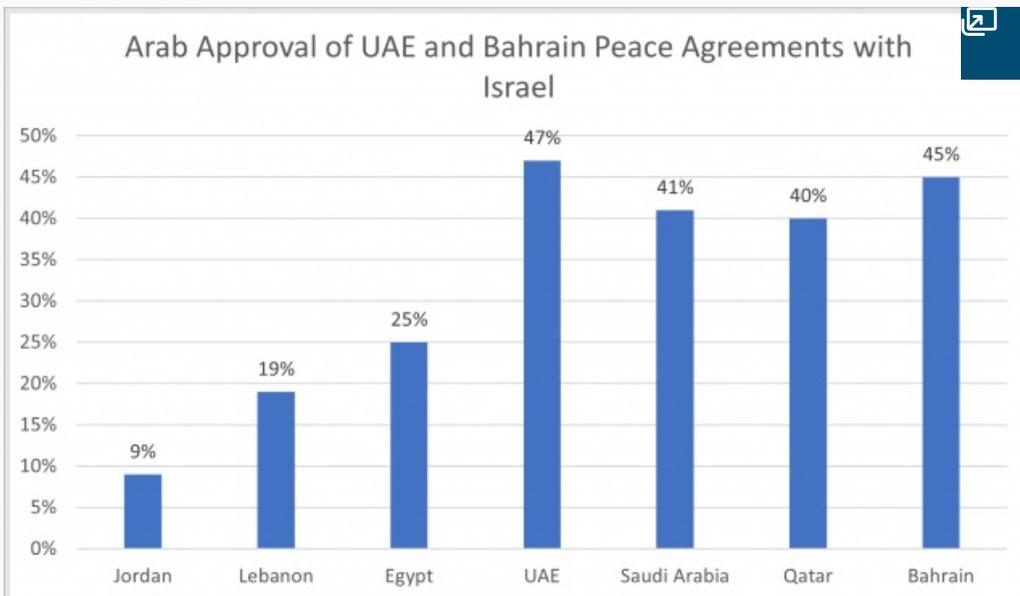
When the United Arab Emirates signed the Abraham Accords with Israel in September, there was much speculation about the popularity of the deal among Emirati citizens themselves. Now, a poll commissioned by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy documents the population's split view of the Abraham Accords—but with support growing, just since June of this year, for sport and business ties with Israelis.

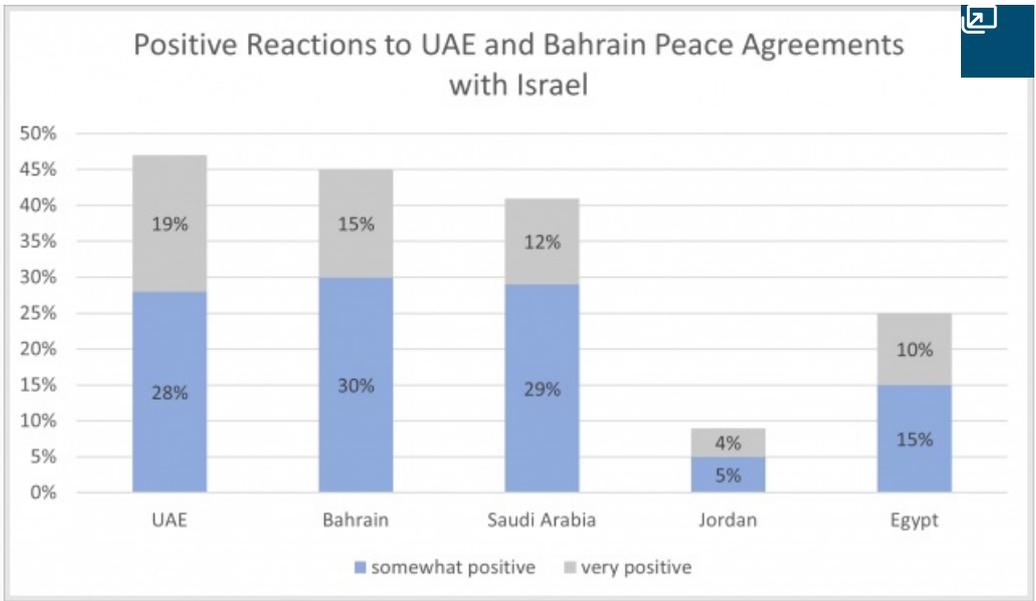
Also in the news are reports of an imminent thaw in Saudi Arabia's intense feud with [Qatar](#). And while there are no signs that the Emirati government is willing to follow suit, its public is supportive of such a move. The majority of Emiratis now support compromise to end the Emirati rift with Qatar, as is also the case for citizens of all involved parties polled. 59% of Emiratis agree that the way forward is for “both sides to compromise in order to reach an agreement,” with little change since the question was last asked in June 2020. But these sentiments have moderated somewhat since the boycott began in 2017, when 46% agreed that “the GCC and Arab countries should boycott Qatar until it accepts their demands.”



Public Split on Peace, Warming Fast Towards Business Ties with Israelis

When asked to give their opinion on the Abraham Accords, Emirati attitudes were evenly divided: 47% said the accords were positive while 49% saw them in a negative light. Of the seven countries polled, Emiratis and [Bahrainis](#) were unsurprisingly the most positive about their countries' normalization agreement. Emiratis were slightly more likely to be "strongly" in favor of the accords than their [Bahraini](#) counterparts, at 19% versus 15%.

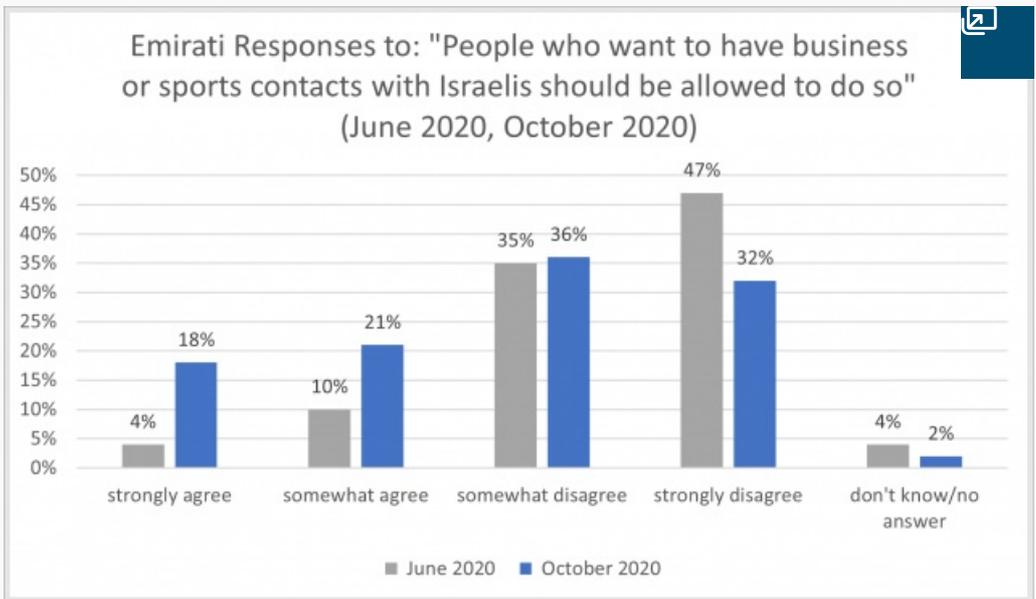




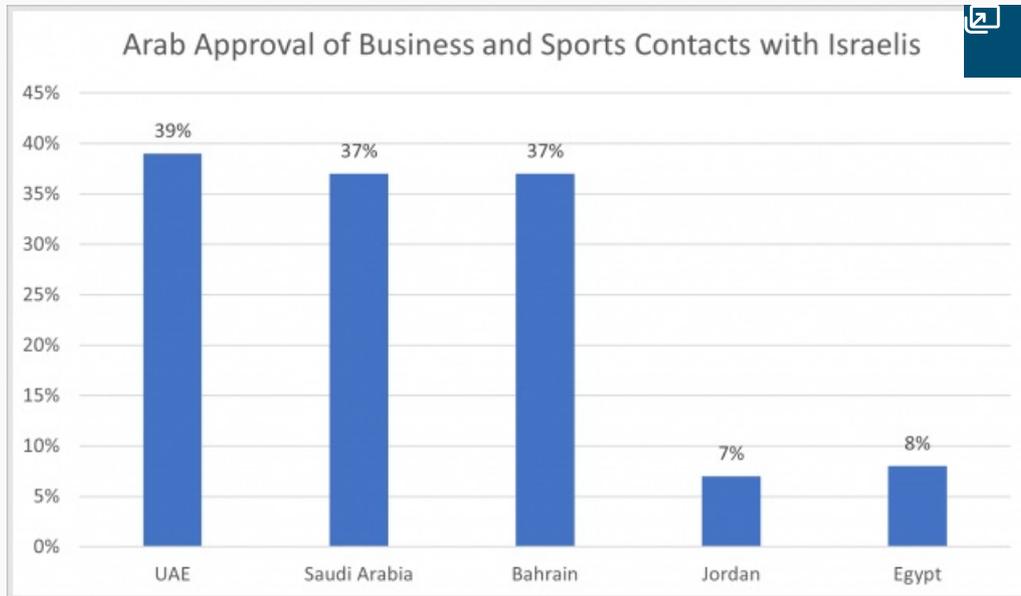
Notably, similar proportions of Emiratis saw the Accords in a positive light across sects and age groups. The UAE's roughly ten-percent Shia minority was only five percentage points less likely to support the deal than the Sunni majority. Youth are just three points more likely to support the deal than those 30 or over.

The proportion who now support the deal is striking, given past data on the issue. When polled in 2018, approximately the same proportion who now support the deal (44%) “strongly” disagreed with the proposition that Arab states should, despite differences on some issues, “work with Israel on other issues like technology, counter-terrorism, and containing Iran”—essentially the backbone of the Abraham Accords. Only 19% even “somewhat” supported this statement at that time.

Under the Abraham accords, new economic opportunities have been a major feature of growing UAE-Israel relations. [The Emirati Minister of Economy has suggested](#) that he expects \$300 to \$500 million in new bilateral trade and investment to come from the deal. Such predictions raise the question of how many Emiratis would be willing to pursue these new business contacts. Back in June 2020, when asked whether those who “want to have business or sports contacts with Israelis should be allowed to do so,” a mere 14% agreed with the idea.

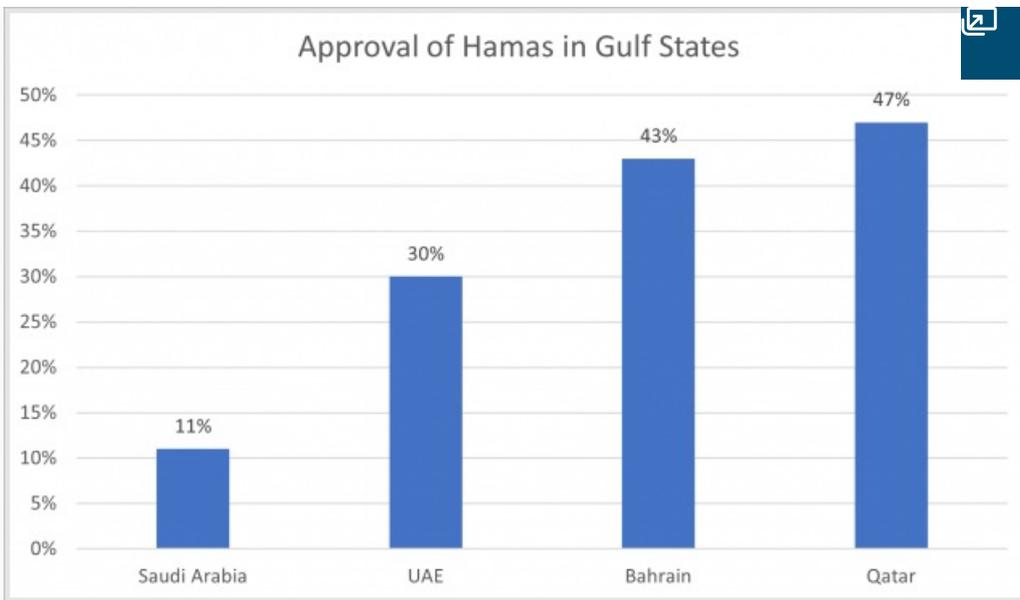


But today, in just the few months since the peace deal was signed, this number has nearly tripled. A similar sharp increase occurred during this short time among [Saudis](#) as well. In the November poll, 39% of Emiratis agreed to the proposal when asked, with Emiratis under 30 slightly more inclined to support this notion (43%). This proportion of Emiratis supporting business or sports contacts with Israelis is a bit ahead of [Bahrainis](#) (37%) or [Saudis](#) (37%)—and far ahead of those in the two Arab states already formally at peace with Israel for many years, [Jordan](#) (7%) and Egypt (8%).



Such a marked increase during a short period of time raises questions of how to interpret this shift. More UAE respondents could now be giving pollsters the ‘party line’ as leadership more fully commits to normalization with Israel—patterns of self-censorship in the country might make this likely. Yet respondents’ willingness to back policies at odds with government policy exhibited elsewhere in the survey, including the quarter who voice support for the Muslim Brotherhood, suggests that significant proportions are willing to venture their personal views in the poll’s private face-to-face interviews.

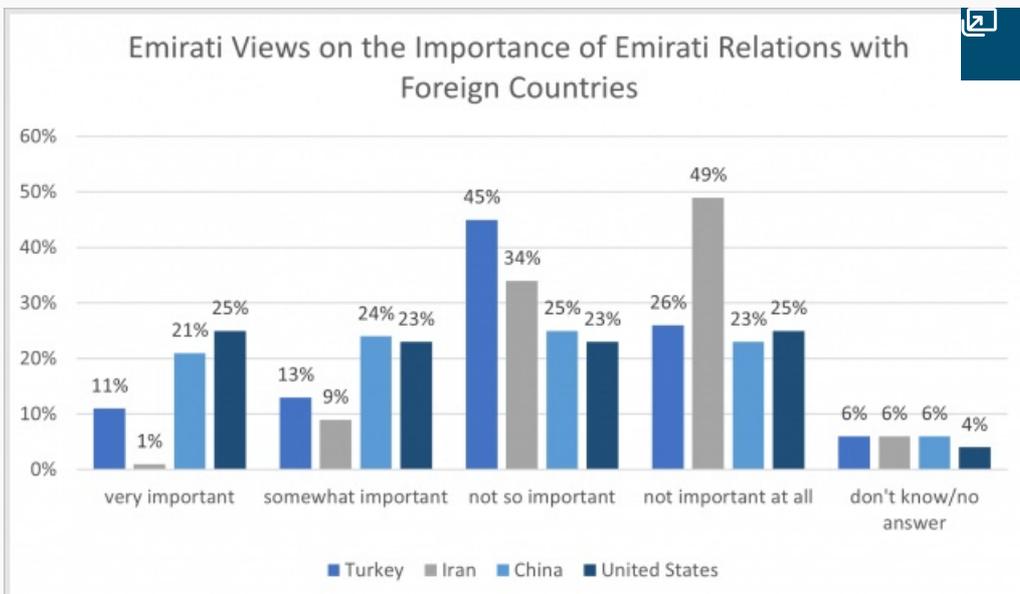
An alternative interpretation is that Emirati public opinion is in fact shifting, as the government makes business opportunities a more readily accessed reality. Moreover, decreasing public support for Hamas over time lends weight to reports that Emirati citizens as well as leadership has become increasingly frustrated with Palestinian leadership. Just 30% of Emiratis see Hamas in a positive light, significantly lower than the rate in some other Gulf countries. Here, there is also a modest generational divide: only a quarter of Emirati citizens under 30 support Hamas, whereas a third of those over 30 do so.



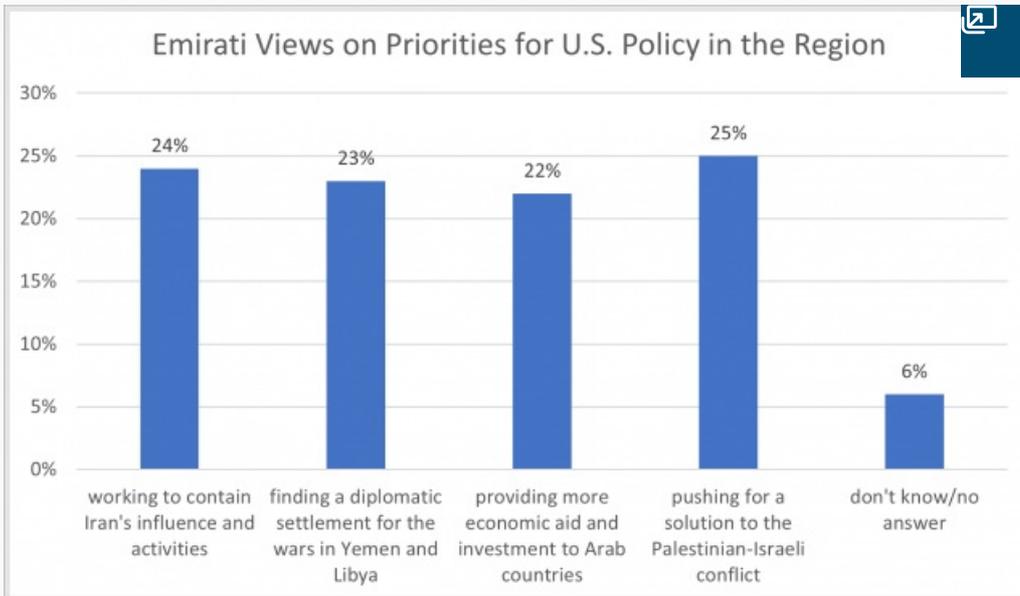
Most Dislike Iran; Half Value U.S. Ties, But Trump Surprisingly Unpopular

On other major foreign policies of the Emirati government, popular support is more mixed. Emiratis do clearly continue to share their government’s concerns over Iran. Just 10% of all Emiratis (and only 14% of Shia) see the end of the UN arms embargo on Iran as a positive development. Similarly, only 9% see good relations with Iran as somewhat or very important.

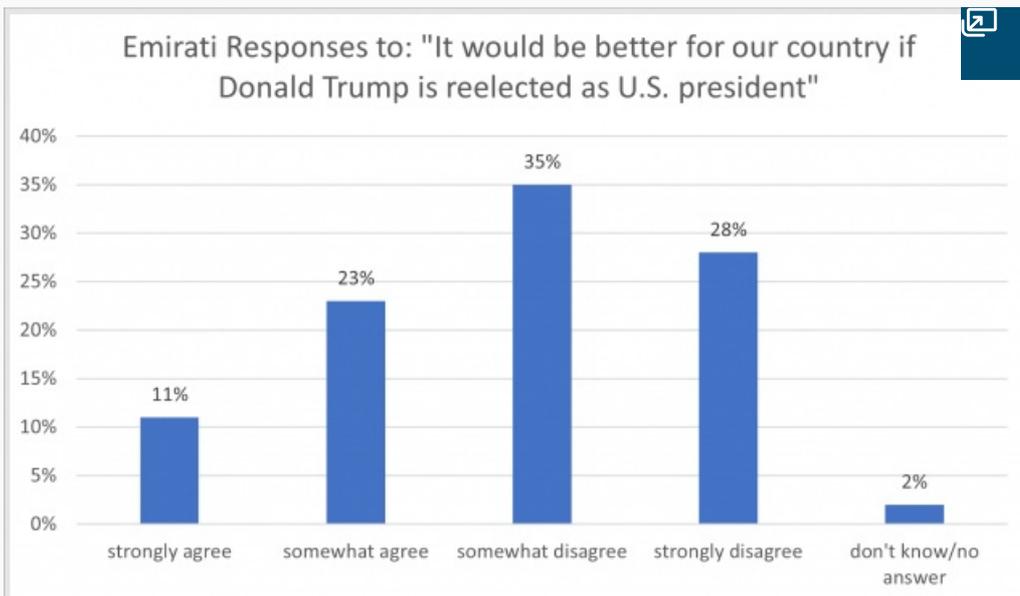
But as a high-profile debate over the U.S. sale of F-35s to the UAE continues, relations with the United States are seen as only marginally more important than those with China (48% versus 45%). Indeed, Emiratis are almost evenly split as to whether relations with Washington are very, somewhat, or not very important, or even not important at all.



Similarly mixed are the top asks from the United States: about a quarter of Emiratis each want Washington to prioritize working to contain Iran’s influence and activities, finding a diplomatic settlement for the wars in Yemen and Libya, providing more economic aid and investment to Arab countries, or pushing for a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

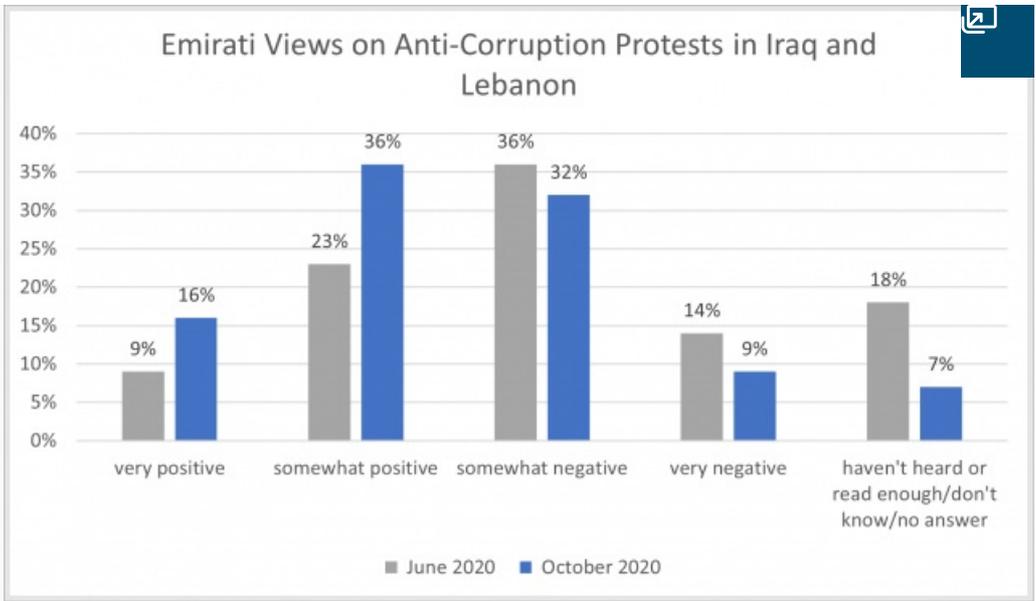


Nor is the Emirati public of one mind about the recent U.S. election. When asked before the results were announced, about a third of Emiratis said it would be better for the UAE if Trump were reelected; but the majority disagreed, with over a quarter “strongly” disagreeing. Emiratis have previously expressed a dim view of Trump himself; just 9% had positive views of him in 2019. On this point, the Emirati public clearly differs with the private views of its elite.



The Younger Generation Marginally More Sympathetic to Protesters Abroad

A significant proportion of Emiratis also see both regional top-down reforms and, to a lesser extent, popular protests in a positive light. The solid majority of Emiratis (70%) express positive feelings towards Saudi Arabia’s new rules on women drivers and a more liberal entertainment scene. But only about half (52%) see anti-corruption protests in Arab countries further afield, such as Lebanon and Iraq, in a positive light.



However, this is a substantially larger percentage than those who supported the protests in June, when just 32% responded positively to the same question. Emirati youth, especially, are now somewhat more likely to support the protests, with 57% seeing the protests as positive, compared with 47% of those 30 or older. More broadly, younger Emiratis are somewhat more likely to support social change and reform efforts than older ones. But questions on Emirati national security concerns, such as Iran or the Houthis, elicit almost identical responses from the two cohorts.

Methodological Note

These findings are from a survey conducted October 17-November 9, 2020 by a highly reputable, independent, and totally apolitical regional commercial market research firm, among a representative national sample of 1,000 UAE citizens. Unlike most other claimed surveys, this one 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 percent. Comprehensive methodological details, including sampling procedures, quality controls, complete questionnaire, and other pertinent information are readily available upon request. ❖

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