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Fikra Forum

Bahrain Poll Shows Split on Peace with Israel, But Sunni-Shia Divide Is Small

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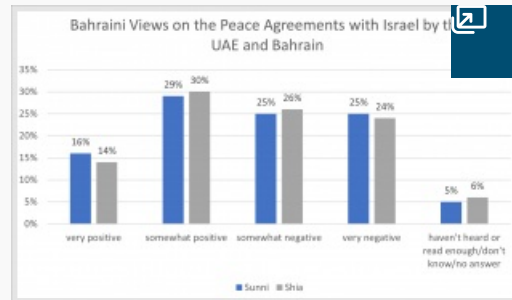
When polled, Sunni and Shia Bahrainis have strikingly similar views on a number of key foreign policy issues, from Israel to Iran.

A new public opinion poll completed last month in Bahrain on behalf of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy reveals that the country’s 700,000 citizens are almost evenly divided about its new peace agreement with Israel: nearly half approve, while half disagree. Only one-fourth, however, “strongly” oppose the Abraham Accords. The data is very similar in simultaneous surveys conducted in [Saudi Arabia](#), [the UAE](#), and [Qatar](#), suggesting that major internal tension over this previously taboo issue is actually unlikely across the Arab Gulf states.

Also significant, despite internal political and social tensions between Bahrain’s ruling Sunni minority and its Shia demographic majority, their respective attitudes toward Israel, Iran, and other sensitive foreign policy issues are surprisingly similar. This equally unexpected finding augurs well for the security and stability of this small island nation, even in the current period of regional political change.

Peace with Israel Divides Bahrainis—but Not Along Sectarian Lines

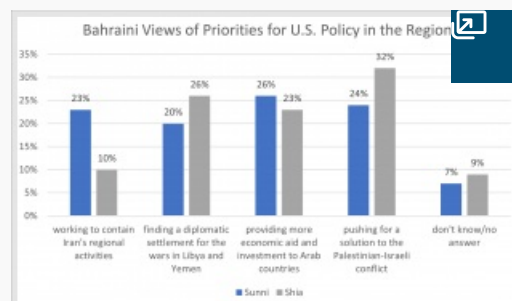
The recent peace and ‘normalization’ agreements between Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain get mixed reviews from both Sunni and Shia Bahrainis. Among the ruling Sunni segment of society, 45% say these deals are positive while 50% call them negative. The comparable figures among Bahrain’s Shia majority are almost identical: 44% positive; 50% negative. Again, this similarity between the views of Sunni and Shia citizens is similarly reflected in Saudi and Emirati responses to the question when broken down by sect.



In a similar vein, around 40% of both Sunnis and Shia in Bahrain voice at least a “somewhat” positive opinion of Hamas, the fundamentalist Palestinian movement that rules Gaza and rejects peace with Israel. Nevertheless, the narrow majority (55%) of both Bahraini sects express a negative view of the group.

Fewer than One-Third View Palestinian-Israeli Conflict as Top Regional Priority for U.S.

Given four options to pick from, the plurality of Shia respondents (32%) and 24% of Sunni respondents say the United States should push for a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as the highest-priority agenda item. Second in importance to Shia respondents is finding a diplomatic solution to the wars in Libya and Yemen. For Sunnis, the most popular response is providing further economic aid and investment to Arab countries. Unsurprisingly, there is some sectarian divergence between Sunni (23%) and Shia (10%) respondents on the priority of the fourth option: “working to contain Iran’s regional activities.”



Narrow Majority Want Compromise with Qatar

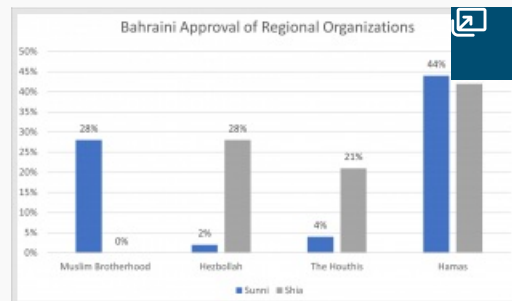
On another controversial regional issue much closer to home, 55% of Bahrainis say that “the way to solve the disputes between Qatar and other Arab states is for both sides to compromise in order to reach an agreement.” The majority of [Qataris](#) agree as well—according to a parallel poll conducted there—as do a majority of [Saudis](#) (65%) and

[Emiratis](#) (59%).

Bahrain's Shia only Modestly more Likely to Favor Iran, Hezbollah, or Houthis

Among Sunnis, a mere 10% believe Iran is an important partner in Bahraini foreign relations, with a substantially larger but still minority (21%) support from Shia. This modest sectarian difference is roughly analogous on the related, highly timely, and specific issue of the end of the UN conventional arms embargo on Iran as of mid-October. Thirty-nine percent of Bahraini Shia see this as a positive development, compared with just 27% of the country's Sunnis.

Approval ratings of Iran's regional allies are also somewhat higher among Shia: Hezbollah (28%) and the Houthis (21%), compared with just 2% for Hezbollah and 4% for the Houthis among Bahraini Sunnis. By comparison, no Shia respondent approves of the Sunni fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood—which 28% of Sunni respondents say they support.



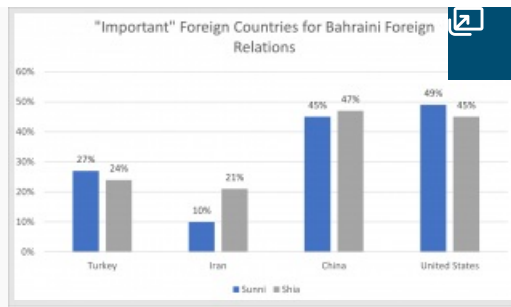
Generational Differences also Surprisingly Small

In another counter-intuitive finding, Bahraini adults under and over 30 years old express only marginally different attitudes—even on seemingly age-related issues. For example, 70% of the younger cohort polled have a favorable view of “the new rules allowing movies, concerts, and women drivers in Saudi Arabia” literally across the causeway from Bahrain; nearly as many (63%) of the older generation express the same sense of favorability.

Similarly, regarding Israel, the generation gap among Bahrainis is actually quite narrow. 40% of those 18-29 years old agree, for instance, that “those who want to have business or sports contacts with Israelis should be allowed to do so.” Among those age 30 and older, the corresponding figure is almost the same: 37%.

China Seen Equal to U.S. in Bahraini Ties; Just One-Third Wanted Trump to Win

Nearly half of both Sunnis and Shia Bahrainis polled value the United States as an “important” foreign country. Among Sunnis and Shia, there was also an even split (45% and 47%) on the importance of relations with China. By comparison, Turkey was considered beneficial to the nation's foreign relations by just 27% of Sunnis and 24% of Shia.



On one topical issue connected to relations with the United States, the Bahraini public seems somewhat at odds with its rulers. Only a third of Bahrainis agree that, “on balance, it would be better for our country if Donald Trump is reelected as U.S. president.” In contrast, Bahrain’s governing elite was generally viewed as preferring Trump’s tough line on Iran and his administration’s active courting of the Gulf Arab monarchies.

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 Bahrain 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 and sectarian 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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