

Recent Saudi Poll: Increased Support for Moderate Islam, Hamas, and Ties with Arab Partners

by [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](#), [Austin Corona \(/experts/austin-corona\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](#)

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.



[Austin Corona \(/experts/austin-corona\)](#)

Austin Corona is a research assistant for Fikra Forum and a 2020 graduate of Georgetown's School of Foreign Service.

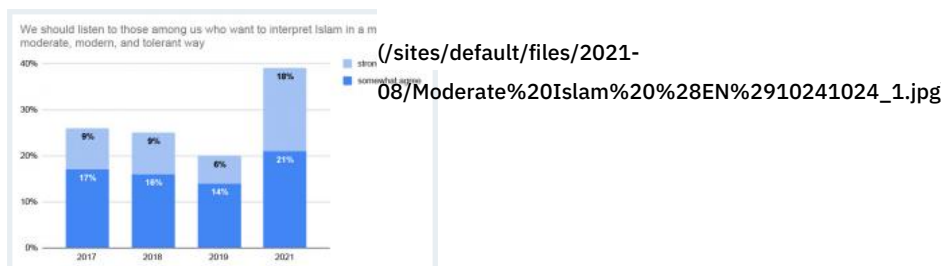
 Brief Analysis

Saudi polling indicates public opinion on key foreign policy issues, and sheds light on where sect and age matter – and where they don't.

Data from a rare yet highly reliable Saudi public opinion poll—commissioned by the Washington Institute and conducted in June 2021—show a range of public attitudes on foreign policy, social reform, and regional politics. In particular, support for a moderate interpretation of Islam has increased over the past four years, with 39% of Saudi citizens now supporting such a proposal, up from 27% in 2017. The data also indicates that many Saudi citizens value Saudi relations with Arab allies, whereas about half see relations with world powers as important. Yet while few Saudis value good relations with Iran, a majority are supportive of continued nuclear negotiations between Iran and the United States.

Saudis on Reform and Protest

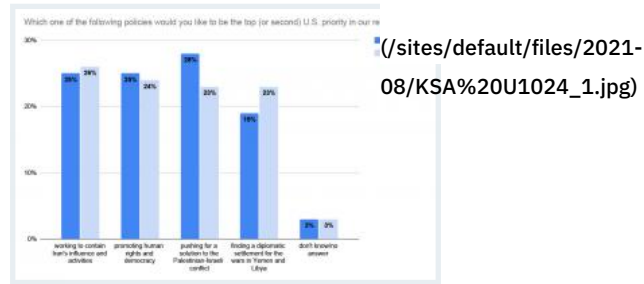
Saudi respondents show a trend of growing support for moderate interpretations of Islam—39% of respondents agree that “we should listen to those among us who want to interpret Islam in a more moderate, modern and tolerant way.” In contrast, support for the banned Muslim Brotherhood continues to decline. Only 14% now see the group in an even somewhat positive light, down from 27% in 2017.



Moreover, appetite for protest is low; 73% Saudis agree that “it’s a good thing we don’t have the kind of street protests against corruption that we see lately in Lebanon, Iraq, and some other places”—while 23% disagree at least somewhat with this sentiment. Notably, Saudi

Arabia's Shia minority is just eight percentage points less likely to agree with this statement.

Saudi responses regarding social reform bode well for the Biden administration's regional goals in promoting human rights. Twenty five percent of Saudis respondents chose "promoting human rights and democracy" as their preferred top priority for the United States in the Middle East, equal to the proposal of "working to contain Iran's influence and activities" and slightly above the 19% who support greater U.S. involvement in Yemen and Libya.



Support for Hamas doubles after Israel-Hamas violence, though feelings on Israel remain largely unchanged

When compared to data collected in November 2020 on Saudi views on Israel, views remain mostly unchanged. One exception is a twelve point increase in support for Hamas, from 11% to 23%. A large minority of Saudi respondents expressed support for "the Hamas launch of missiles and rockets into Israel for ten days in May", with 46% of respondents characterizing those events as "positive." Furthermore, the Hamas administration in Gaza is slightly more popular than the Palestinian Authority, which 20% see in a positive light.

These attitudes about Hamas, however, did not coincide with a decrease in support for Arab relations with Israel. Support for the Abraham Accords has decreased only slightly since the December 2020 poll, dropping from 41% in December 2020 to 36% in June 2021.

Furthermore, Saudi support for open sports and business contacts with Israelis continues to grow, now standing at 36%, up from 31% in December 2020 and 9% in June 2020.

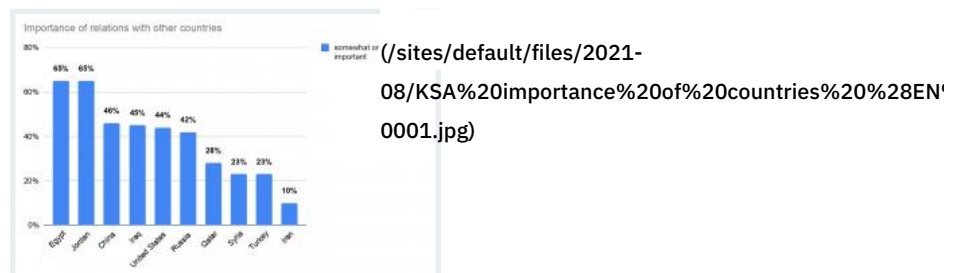
Notably, in all questions regarding Israeli-Palestinian affairs, Saudi respondents were generally unified across generations. Older Saudi respondents (30 and above) did not support the Palestinian cause or oppose Arab-Israeli relations any more than respondents under 30.

Saudis value ties with Arab allies more than ties with global powers

On the topic of foreign relations, Saudi respondents saw good relations with Arab allies as more important than those with non-local global powers. Sixty-five percent of Saudi respondents said good relations were important with Egypt and Jordan, whereas fewer respondents saw relations with the United States (44%), Russia (42%), or China (46%) in this light.

On the other hand, Saudis value relations with global powers significantly more than relations with unfriendly or adversarial regional actors. Few Saudi respondents placed importance on relations with Syria (23%), Turkey (23%), or Iran (10%). Of note, only 17% of Saudi Arabia's Shia respondents considered relations with Iran to be important.

Furthermore, despite the recent thaw in relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, only 28% of Saudi respondents valued good relations with Qatar. Even so, when polled earlier in November 2020, 63% of Saudi respondents said that compromise was the solution to quarrels between Qatar and the quartet, suggesting that the recent thaw is seen in a relatively positive light.



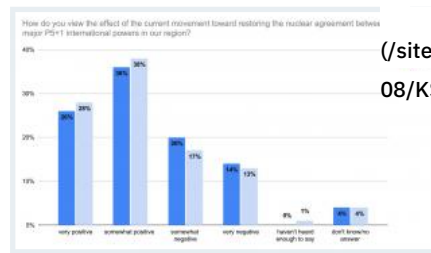
Though wary of Iran, Saudis support nuclear negotiations

Saudi respondents express considerable unease about Iran and its proxies. Only 10% of Saudi respondents say good relations with Iran are important, and only 3% of Saudi respondents expressed a positive view of Hezbollah. A quarter of Saudi respondents chose "working to

contain Iran's influence and activities" as their preference for the top U.S. priority in the Middle East.

At the same time, however, 63% of Saudi respondents supported U.S. nuclear negotiations with Iran. Though Saudis maintain an adversarial view of Iran, this does not mean they disapprove of diplomatic approaches to Iranian activities.

Notably, Shia and Sunni respondents show a considerable gap in their approval of Hezbollah; while no Sunnis polled had an even somewhat positive view of the group, over a third of Shia did. Though less pronounced, there are also other denominational differences in views on Iran. More Sunni respondents (26%) than Shia respondents (18%) choose containing Iranian activities as a priority for U.S. policy in the Middle East.



(/sites/default/files/2021-08/KSA%20Iran%20negotiations%20%28EN%29.jpg)

Methodological Note

Each of these three surveys consisted of face-to-face interviews with a true random national sample of citizens (excluding the large expatriate, mostly guest worker population), male and female, over the age of eighteen. The statistical margin of error is 3%. The samples were selected by standard geographic probability methods, with interviews conducted in Arabic in private homes by experienced local professionals. The translation from the English original questionnaire was back-checked by native speakers and pretested for clarity and precision. Strict assurances of confidentiality, along with supervisory quality controls, were provided throughout. Additional methodological details are readily available on request. ❖

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