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Bahrainis Support Internal Political Focus, but Differ Somewhat on Foreign Policy Priorities

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Sep 9, 2021

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**Brief Analysis**

New polling data reveals generational consensus and only slight sectarian discord among Bahrainis.

A new poll conducted in June 2021 provides valuable insight into the priorities of Bahrainis. The data collected was sub-divided by age in two groups - ages 18 to 29 and 30 and over – as well as denomination: Shia and Sunni. As was the case in previous polling, there is remarkably little difference between the under 30 and 30+ generations. Surprisingly, only around 40 percent in each cohort support Bahrain’s normalization of relations with Israel – although this level did not drop after the Israel-Hamas conflict in May of this year.

Bahrain’s Shia majority does differ with the ruling Sunnis in their views on several issues, especially Iran. But compared with the mass uprising on the island early in the Arab Spring a decade ago, attitudes have mellowed. The large majority of both sects now rejects “mass street protests ... as in Iraq, Lebanon, and some other Arab states. And the majority of Bahrain’s Shia – a larger margin than in any other segment polled – want to “interpret Islam in a more moderate, tolerant, and modern direction.”

Bahraini perspective on U.S. Role in Region and Israel-Palestine

Many Bahrainis support U.S. involvement in “pushing for a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.” When asked to rank priorities for U.S. regional policy, nearly a third ranked this first—at least ten percentage points above Saudi or Emirati respondents. Notably, this interest is apparently driven by Bahrain’s Shia majority; 35% ranking this option first compared to 27% of Sunnis.

At least some of this discrepancy can be explained by Shia’s relative lack of appetite for the United States to “contain Iran’s influence and activities.” Just 21% of Shia listed this as a first or second priority, compared to 46% of Sunni Bahrainis. However, there was no statistical difference between the two denominations in their support for “promoting human rights and democracy” and just ten percentage point difference in prioritizing “finding a diplomatic settlement for the wars in Yemen and Libya.”

Interest in U.S. involvement in resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has increased slightly since last polled in November 2020, and since the flashpoint in May between Israel and Hamas. Further responses demonstrate that while Palestinian leadership is unpopular, the country’s official policy of normalization with Israel is supported by a consistent minority of Bahrainis.

Regardless of demographic breakdown, a majority of Bahrainis polled expressed an at least somewhat negative opinion of Hamas administration in Gaza and the Palestinian authority in Ramallah. However, of the two, Hamas is much less likely to be seen in a negative light, and Bahraini support for Hamas (44%) is significantly higher than in the Emirates (22%) or Saudi Arabia (23%).

Moreover, there is a slim majority support for Hamas’s recent attacks on Israel, with 53% of Bahrainis expressing a somewhat or very positive view of “The Hamas launch of missiles and rockets into Israel for ten days in May.” In addition, 62% of respondents disagree at least somewhat that individuals should be allowed to have business or sports relationships with Israelis—though this view is in line with other Gulf publics and remains effectively unchanged since last November.

Notably, regarding the question of contacts with Israelis and in regards to the Abraham Accords, Bahrainis also have very similar views to other Gulf countries polled. Similar to last November, a small majority sees the Abraham Accords in a negative light, while 41% support it at least somewhat.

Internal Attitudes and Foreign Relations

There is consensus support for domestic and political reform. When asked whether focusing on these internal issues was more important than any foreign policy issue or foreign war, 40% of Bahrainis strongly agreed that this was the case. Likewise, almost three-fourths of Bahrainis agreed at least somewhat with this statement.

Similarly, the appetite for civil unrest appears minimal. When asked whether they agreed if it was a good thing that Bahrain did not have the same kind of street protests that have recently been seen in Lebanon, Iraq, and elsewhere, 71% agreed. Respondents may be influenced by the country’s ongoing monitoring and targeting of civil society leaders.

This sentiment is also reflected in the responses given by Bahrainis asked about other players in the region and globally. When asked about the importance of maintaining good relations with other Arab states—Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Syria, or Qatar—only Egypt and Jordan achieved a slim majority.

When it comes to regional powers—including Russia, China, Iran, the United States, and Turkey—views are more mixed. Fifty-one percent of Bahrainis responded that it was at least somewhat important to have good relations between Bahrain and the United States, slightly higher than those who saw ties with China as important (47%). A

slightly larger majority (56%) of Bahrainis are supportive of the change in U.S. presidents from Donald Trump to Joe Biden, and an even larger majority support “restoring the nuclear agreement” between Iran and P5+1 powers, including 69% of Shia Bahrainis.

Even so, under a third (28%) of Bahrainis overall see relations with Iran as important, though here views split notably by demographic: just 11% percent of Sunnis versus 37% of Shia believe this to be the case.

And despite the current thaw between Qatar and the quartet countries, under a quarter of Bahrainis see Qatar as even somewhat important, slightly below Turkey. Notably, however, a quarter of Bahraini Sunnis continue to see the Muslim Brotherhood in at least a somewhat positive light (slightly higher than Sunnis polled in the Emirates or Saudi Arabia). In contrast, no Shia polled see the Muslim Brotherhood as anything better than ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ negative.

Also notable is that many Bahrainis—and Shia Bahrainis in particular—are supportive of the proposition that “we should listen to those among us who want to interpret Islam in a more moderate, modern, and tolerant way.” For 46% of Sunnis and 55% of Shia Bahrainis, this is an appealing proposition, and represents largest proportion of support among the Gulf countries polled.

While some sectarian differences exist, especially in the emphasis placed on Iran by Shias and on the US or Arab partners by Sunnis, the data demonstrate an overall inclination among all Bahrainis to be more invested in domestic affairs – without confrontations. This augurs well for the island nation’s stability. Yet the relative unpopularity of the Abraham Accord with Israel, and popularity of Hamas, suggest a potential cause for concern going forward. ❖



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