

New Lebanon Poll: Sectarian Consensus Against Beirut and for Beijing

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Brief Analysis

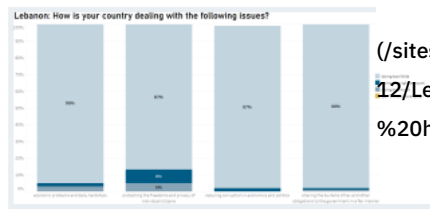
While all sectarian groups voice increased frustration with the government, positive Shia views on Iran still differ sharply from others.

A Lebanese public opinion poll in November, commissioned by the Washington Institute and conducted by an independent local survey research firm, provides rare hard data showing that the country's fractious sects finally agree on something: Lebanon's government is failing at its most essential tasks. Nevertheless, the deep, continuing divide between the country's Shia and the other groups regarding close ties with Iran imposes a high hurdle against any fundamental political reforms.

Ninety-six percent or even more in every major group—Shia, Sunni, Christian, and Druze—say their government is doing “too little” to address each of the following problems: “dealing with our growing economic problems and people’s daily hardships”; “reducing the level of corruption in our economic and political life”; and “sharing the burden of taxes and other obligations to the government in a fair manner.” This demonstrates a marginal increase across sectarian groups in their already very high levels of frustration with the government; in 2019, 93% of Sunnis and 92% of Christians said the government was doing too little to address economic problems, and in 2018, 91% of Sunnis and Christians, and 83% of Druze said the government was doing too little to address sharing tax burdens. (To put these numbers in perspective, a November 2020 poll in Jordan that asked the same question showed just half the citizenry voicing those views.)

In a different area, “protecting the freedoms and privacy of individual citizens,” the new Lebanese poll is a striking example of how significantly public opinion has shifted against the authorities. Among Sunnis, Christians, and Druze, around 90% say the government is doing too little, and among Shia, that figure drops to 77%. In comparison, when asked the same question in 2018, only 45% of Sunnis, 69% of Christians, 64% of Druze and 55% of Shia said that the government was doing too little.

Moreover, there is now almost no generational difference among respondents' answers, with nearly identical proportions of respondents above and below 30 years old sharing these heavily negative views. Additionally, no more than 8% of any sectarian or age cohort say they oppose “big street demonstrations against corruption.”



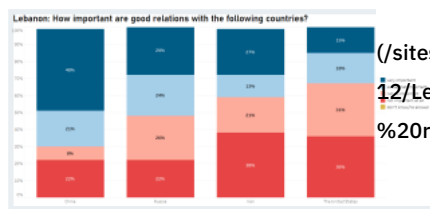
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China Now In Strong Lead As Perceived Partner; Russia Second; United States Third

One startling new statistic provided by this poll is another cross-sectarian consensus: the rise of China as a perceived partner for Lebanon. Among all three major sects, solid majorities now say good relations with China are important for Lebanon: among Shia, 82%; Sunnis, 73%; Christians, 60%.

With regard to the United States, the comparable figures are much lower. Among Lebanese Shia, not too surprisingly, a mere 15% consider it important for Lebanon to have good relations with the United States. More surprising is the continued lower proportion who believe good relations are important among the other two large communities: Sunnis, 42%; Christians, just 39%—while half of Lebanon’s Sunnis and Christians say it is important for their country to have good ties with Russia. This represents a significant increase among Sunnis since 2018, when only 28% said that good relations with Russia were important.

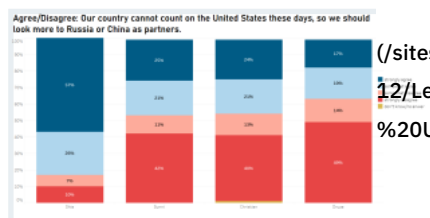
Additionally, Druze support on this metric has increased significantly; in 2018, a mere 13% said good relations with Russia were important; in 2021 the number jumped to 48%. Among Lebanon’s Shia, however, this trend points in the opposite direction. Two-thirds now say it is important for their country to have good ties with Russia—a significant decrease since 2018, when an overwhelming 92% of Shia said this. The reasons for these diverging sectarian trends regarding Russia is not entirely clear, but they probably reflect opposing views of Moscow’s less-than-total support for Shia militias in neighboring Syria.



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Similar sentiments extend to some specific policy questions as well. Solid majorities of Shia, Sunnis, and Christians agree that the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan was a plus for the region. No more than one-fifth in any of the three groups foresee any positive impact from “the U.S. agreement to keep a few thousand military advisers in Iraq.” By comparison, solid majorities in all three groups perceive positive effects from “the rise of Chinese investment in several Arab countries”: Shia, 79%; Sunnis, 60%; Christians, 57%. As for “the increase in Russian arms sales to several Arab countries,” the picture is more mixed. While the majority (57%) of Lebanon’s Shia view this favorably, significantly fewer Sunnis (33%) or Christians (41%) concur. Here again, the sectarian split probably stems from contrasting attitudes toward Russian support for both Lebanese Hezbollah and the Assad regime in Syria.

A nuanced portrait also emerges from an explicitly comparative question on this topic. The survey asked about this assertion: “Our country cannot count on the U.S. these days, so we should look more to Russia or China as partners.” Among Shia, 83% agreed. But among the other two major sects, the corresponding proportions were just under half: Sunnis, 46%; Christians, 45%.

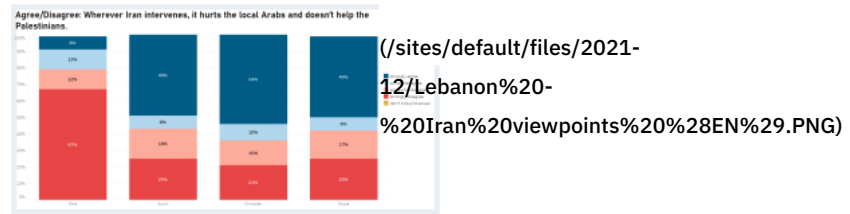


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Sharp Sectarian Cleavage on Iran Persists

In stark contrast, Lebanon’s sectarian communities continue to differ more sharply about another key issue with both foreign and domestic implications: relations with Iran and its regional allies. Among Lebanese Shia, 77% think it is “very important” to have good relations with Iran; but among the Sunnis, Christians, or Druze, that proportion plummets to single digits. Similarly, when asked about the election of Ebrahim Raisi as Iran’s new president last summer, three-fourths of Lebanese Shia said this would have at least a “somewhat positive” effect on the region. But among Lebanon’s other sects, the corresponding figure barely breaks 10%.

A related, more provocative question yields an equally eye-opening sectarian attitudinal cleavage. Respondents were asked about this proposition: “Wherever Iran intervenes, it hurts the local Arabs and doesn’t help the Palestinians.” Among Lebanese Sunnis, Christians, and Druze, solid majorities (57-64%) agree with that statement. By contrast, among the country’s Shia, just 20% concur.



Regarding regional rapprochement with Iran or its allies, this Lebanese sectarian divide is significantly less pronounced. Asked about “the moves by some Arab states to restore relations with [Syrian president] Assad,” 81% of Lebanon’s Shia view that favorably. A third of Lebanese Christians agree—as do nearly half (46%) of the country’s small Druze minority, who also have a significant community of kin across the Syrian border. Among Lebanon’s Sunnis, however, barely one-quarter (23%) expect any positive effects from rapprochement with the Assad regime.

A higher level of sectarian consensus emerges, however, concerning a possible rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Nearly half of Lebanese Sunnis (43%) and Christians (48%) say that it would have a positive impact on the region. Fully 79% of Lebanon’s Shia agree with that judgment, as do 64% among the Druze community.

Methodological Note

This analysis is based on findings from a November 2021 personal interview survey among a representative national sample of 1,000 citizens in Lebanon, conducted by a highly experienced, entirely apolitical local professional services company specializing in such research. The sample was selected through standard geographical probability procedures, yielding a theoretical statistical margin of error of approximately 3% for the total sample, but approximately 5% for the Shia, Sunni, and Christian subsamples. (The much smaller Druze subsample, selected in proportion to its small minority of the overall population, is too limited to allow for statistically valid generalizations; so those findings must be considered indicative rather than conclusive.)

Strict assurances confidentiality, quality controls, and comprehensive COVID safety protocols were provided throughout. Additional methodological details, including full questionnaire, demographic breaks, and other information, are readily available on request. ❖

RECOMMENDED



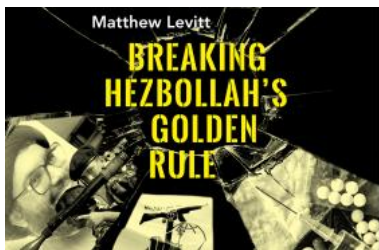
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