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Bahrain Polls Shows Sharper Sectarian Split on Iran, Less Hope on Israel Peace

by [David Pollock](#)

Jan 14, 2022

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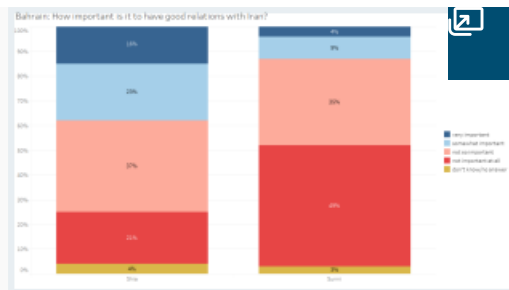
Brief Analysis

In a spike from earlier years, Bahrainis are increasingly divided on Iran.

A rare new public opinion poll, commissioned by the Washington Institute and conducted in Bahrain during November 2021, reveals a larger-than-ever divide between the narrow Shia majority and ruling Sunni minority regarding relations with Iran. The survey also documents a steep decline in popular expectations, among both groups, for the Abraham Accords with Israel – but tempered by majority optimism about post-Netanyahu prospects.

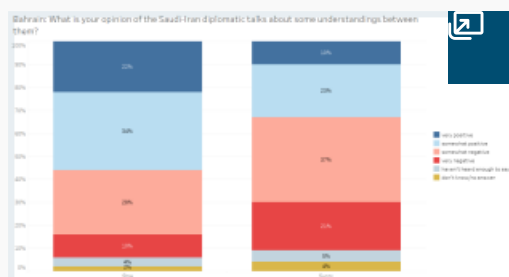
Iran A Wedge Issue Between Bahraini Sects, Though Even Most Shia Say Ties Unimportant

Bahraini popular attitudes toward Iran now demonstrate a significant sectarian cleavage. A mere 13% of the Sunnis say it is “important” for their country to have good relations with Iran; the proportion among the Bahraini Shia is triple that number, at 39%. The comparable figures from the previous survey in Bahrain, two years ago, were less divergent: at that time, 10% of Sunnis, and 21% of Shia, voiced support for good relations with Iran.



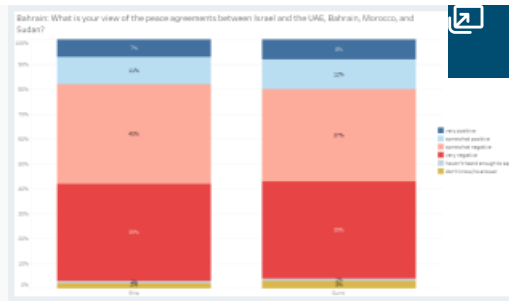
The reasons for this shift among the Shia are unclear; but it may reflect less a change of heart than a greater willingness to express opposition to official policy, at least in private. It probably also signifies persistent Shia dissatisfaction with their lower socioeconomic status and partial exclusion from politics. To put their attitudes toward Iran in perspective, the percentages who say that good relations with the United States are important for Bahrain are as follows: among Sunnis, 52%; among Shia, 42%.

Notably, the sectarian split on Iran extends to several other questions in this survey. For example, two-thirds of the Sunnis, but just 16% of the Shia, agree with this deliberately controversial proposition: “Wherever Iran intervenes, it hurts the local Arabs and doesn’t help the Palestinians.” Conversely, nearly two-thirds (64%) of the Shia, compared with only 29% of the Sunnis, perceive any positive impact on the region from the recent election of Ebrahim Raisi as president of Iran. And the majority (56%) of Shia, but only a third of Bahrain’s Sunnis, voice a favorable view of the ongoing “Saudi-Iran diplomatic talks about some understandings between them.”

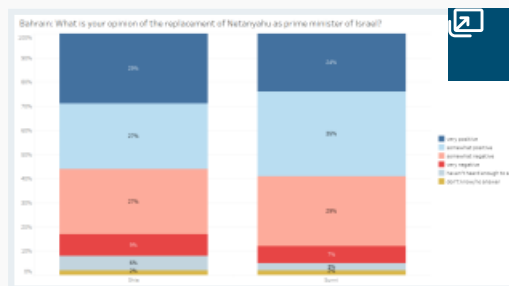


Very Modest Expectations from Abraham Accords, But Majority Like Netanyahu’s Ouster

On the Abraham Accords with Israel, this survey registers a decrease in public backing compared to the previous Bahrain poll in October/November 2020, soon after those accords were signed. Currently, only 18-20% of Bahrainis, whether Shia or Sunni, say the Abraham Accords will have “a positive effect on the region.” By comparison, a similar question two years ago showed 44-45% in both groups voicing a favorable view of the new peace deal with Israel. Apparently, some of this initial welcome has worn off over time, as most Bahrainis now fail to see much positive regional impact (or internal economic benefits) from the Abraham Accords.



Nevertheless, popular acceptance of economic and other contacts with Israel currently registers at a significantly higher level, again among both communities. Asked whether “people who want to have business or sports contacts with Israelis should be allowed to do so,” 37% of Bahrainis agree. Nearly as many (34%) approve of “the recent economic deals between Jordan, Egypt, and Israel. And a surprisingly solid majority of 58% say that “the replacement of Netanyahu as Israel’s prime minister” will have some positive effects on the region.



Surprisingly, as in the six other Arab countries polled in November, only modest differences between younger and older generations emerge on any of these issues. Regarding business or sports contacts with Israelis, for instance, 40% of Bahrainis in the 18-30-year-old cohort voice acceptance of that new phenomenon. Among their elders, that proportion is only marginally lower, at 35%.

Methodological Note

This analysis is based on a personal interview survey among a representative national sample of 1,000 Bahraini citizens, conducted in November 2021 by a highly experienced, qualified, and entirely apolitical regional commercial firm. The sample was selected using standard geographic probability procedures, yielding subsamples of 663 Shia and 337 Sunni respondents, in rough proportion to their shares of the total national population.

However, given the uncertainty about the precise proportions, the analysis here generally considers each of the two groups separately. The statistical margin of error for the total sample is approximately 3 percent; it is approximately 4 percent for the Shia subsample, and 5.5 percent for the Sunni one.

Strict assurances of confidentiality, quality controls, and coronavirus safety protocols were provided by the pollster throughout the fieldwork. Additional methodological information, including full Arabic questionnaire, demographic breaks, and other details are readily available upon request. ❖



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