

# Polling Indicates Widespread Frustration in Lebanon and Sectarian Disagreement on Global Powers

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Brief Analysis

*Editorial note: For the most recent polling data from Lebanon, see our November 2022 data here (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-lebanon-opinion-poll-shows-continued-internal-dissatisfaction-and-desire>).*

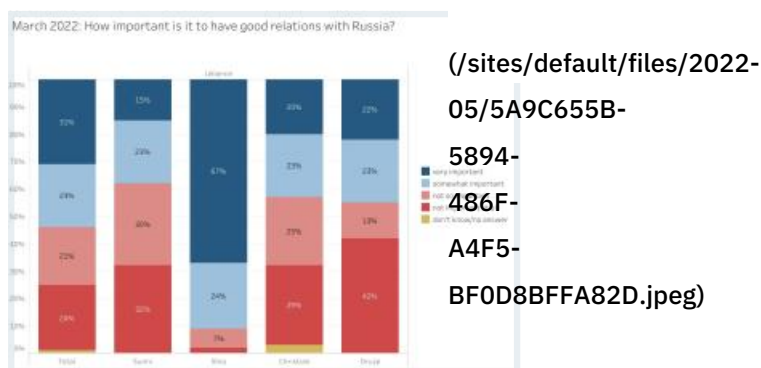
## Lebanese Shia, Sunnis, and Christians are increasingly divided on the United States and Russia, while China maintains cross-sectarian favorability and ties with Iran have jumped in importance among Sunnis.

On May 15, the Lebanese electorate delivered a clear message to Hezbollah and its allies, causing Hezbollah to lose its parliamentary majority while Samir Geagea's nationalist Christian Lebanese Forces party won 17 seats. It remains to be seen whether this outcome will translate into substantive change in Lebanon, but the vote underscored that Lebanese are fed up with the status quo and that Hezbollah's support from Christian and Druze allies and Sunni voters is **slipping (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-hezbollahs-parliamentary-loss-means-lebanon>)**. Similar outcomes were reflected in a March 2022 poll, commissioned by the Washington Institute and conducted by an independent local survey research firm, which found clear Sunni-Shia divides on foreign policy and a burgeoning cross-sectarian consensus regarding Lebanon's dire internal state. As the country endures economic and political crises that continue to cause widespread humanitarian suffering, it is unsurprising that sectarian strife, as well as a strong view of outside powers as important, overlap with election results indicating a population's desire for change.

**Relations with Russia, U.S. see clear Sunni-Shia split**

Since Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022 it has maintained the global spotlight, yet according to the March poll, Lebanese citizens share little consensus on Russia's role in the world and its relations to their own country.

Shia favorability regarding relations with Russia jumped significantly in just four months, from 69% of Lebanese Shia calling these ties important in November 2021 compared to 91% of Lebanese Shia responding with this same answer in March 2022. Over that same period, Lebanese Sunni respondents expressed a marginal decrease on this metric, with 38% calling ties with Russia important in March 2022, compared with 43% in November 2021. Similarly, 43% of Lebanese Christians called ties with Russia important in March 2022 compared to 47% in November 2021.



To explore this data and more, access TWI's interactive public opinion poll database [here](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/twi-interactive-polling-platform) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/twi-interactive-polling-platform>).

In the recent March poll, when asked about the importance and role of other global powers, this sectarian dichotomy was ubiquitous. Examining the numbers, a clear Sunni-Shia split is apparent in terms of the roles that Russia and the United States should play on the world stage, among other matters.

When asked which country "can best help protect us against foreign enemies," 51% of Lebanese Sunni chose the United States in contrast to just 14% choosing Russia, while 58% of Lebanese Shia chose Russia and only 4% indicated the United States. Similarly, when asked what country "you would most like to visit, study or work in," 65% of Lebanese Sunni said the United States while just 10% said Russia, and 51% of Lebanese Shia picked Russia in contrast to 11% said the United States. And when asked what country can "best promote human rights and democracy in our country," 49% of Lebanese Sunni said the United States while 13% said Russia, and 53% of Lebanese Shia said Russia while 3% said the United States.

On these matters, a plurality of Lebanese Christians expressed preferences in line with the preferences of Lebanese Sunni, with 45% saying the United States could best protect Lebanon from foreign enemies, 52% saying the United States would be most influential ten years from now, 53% saying they would visit, study or work in the United States, and 39% saying the United States could best promote human rights and democracy.

Notably, the one area where a majority of Lebanese Shia did not pick Russia as the country best suited to fill one of these roles was in response to the question: "what country will be most influential in our region ten years from now?" Among Lebanese Shia, 44% said China, 37% said Russia, and 5% said the United States. Among Lebanese Sunni, 57% said the United States, 28% said China and 7% said Russia.

Sectarian divergence on Russia was also reflected in responses to questions pertaining to the war in Ukraine. 61% of Lebanese Shia characterized the Russian military actions in Ukraine as somewhat or very positive, compared to just 8% of Lebanese Sunni and 12% of Lebanese Christians. And when asked to respond to the statement "The Russian military actions in Ukraine are to blame for the recent rise in food prices here," 88% of Sunni agreed somewhat or

strongly, compared to 57% of Shia. On this metric, Christian respondents were more closely aligned with Shia respondents, with 62% agreeing somewhat or strongly with the statement.

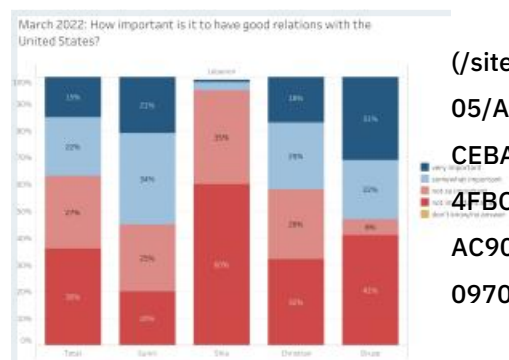
These results are likely explained by perceptions about Russia’s global role and alliances. Russia is perceived as a partner to the axis of Middle East actors who oppose the United States and the West. This axis is primarily composed of Iran, the Assad regime, Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militias, although Russia’s actual ties to each of these actors differ considerably. Echoing the Kremlin, these actors have framed the Russian invasion of Ukraine as a defensive maneuver against the aspirations of a hegemonic, Western-led world order. Lebanese Hezbollah specifically has adopted this broader rhetoric as a core feature of its identity. Shia support for Russia, and Sunni-Shia polarization regarding the roles of the United States and Russia, are likely explained by these dynamics.

### **Ties to the United States rank low, but see slight popularity increase among Sunni**

Findings from the March 2022 poll also indicated sectarian divergence among Lebanese respondents regarding the role of the United States and its ties to Lebanon. The total number of Lebanese who rate relations with the United States as “important” has hovered around 35% over the last several years—significantly lower than Lebanese respondents’ overall ratings of China and Russia, which maintain about 65% and 55%, respectively, on the same metric.

However, the recent poll indicates that Lebanese Shia see relations with the United States as increasingly unimportant while Lebanese Sunni are perceiving relations with the United States to be increasingly important. In TWI’s November 2021 poll, the United States ranked lowest across all three major sects in Lebanon in terms of importance of ties with Beirut. However, in the most recent poll, 55% of Lebanese Sunni ranked relations with the U.S. as somewhat or very important—a significant jump from 42% in 2021 and 43% in 2019.

Likewise in the most recent poll, Russia came in last—at 43%—among Lebanese Sunni in terms of importance of ties when compared to the United States and China. Among Lebanese Shia, the trend is in reverse: in the recent March poll, just 4% of Lebanese Shia ranked relations with the United States as somewhat or very important—a significant drop from 15% in 2021 and 14% in 2019. Moreover, as mentioned above, Lebanese Shia demonstrated a significant increase in terms of perceptions of ties with Russia in this latest poll. Lebanese Christians’ rankings of ties with the United States have held steady, with about 40% of respondents calling these ties important.



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The increase in Lebanese Sunni perceptions of the United States as an important partner may be a result of Hezbollah and Iran’s decreasing popularity among this demographic. Many Lebanese Sunni understand that Iran enabled Hezbollah to have an outsized influence in Lebanon. Moreover, they view Hezbollah as part of the political elite running Lebanon into the ground while ruling with an iron fist, and as bolstering their “resistance” agenda while doing little to help Lebanese people as they continue to suffer. Lebanese Sunni are as a result likely perceiving the United States to be a more reliable alternative to Iran and its proxy Hezbollah. Additionally, as the Lebanese

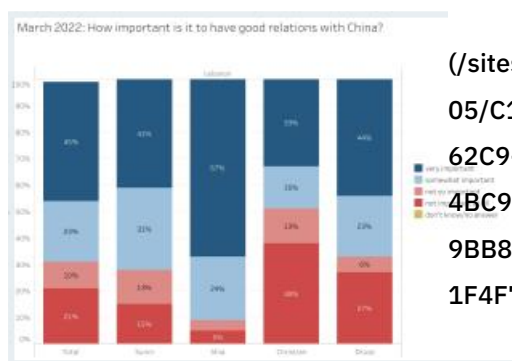
Armed Forces suffer from massive supply shortages, the prospect of U.S. funding to reinvigorate the LAF is appealing to a population watching its internal institutions fail continuously.

### Consensus regarding Beijing, with some sectarian divergence

When it comes to China, the difference in Sunni and Shia perceptions are more subtle. 68% of Lebanese polled in 2022 called relations with China important, on par with the number who did so in 2021. However, a closer look at sectarian breakdowns indicates that China’s popularity among Lebanese Shia is skyrocketing while its popularity among Sunni is strong but holding steady. In October 2017, November 2021, and March 2022, 74%, 82%, and 91% of Lebanese Shia said relations with China were important. Moreover, while only 37% of Shia called these relations “very important” in 2017, this metric jumped to 67% by the most recent poll. In comparison, 72% of Sunni respondents called relations with China somewhat or very important, a number on par with Sunni metrics from 2021.

This trend is likely a result of China’s burgeoning status as a key player in the Middle East, especially when it comes to investment and trade. Moreover, perceptions about China’s close ties with Russia and Iran likely explain China’s intense popularity among Lebanese Shia, particularly in light of findings that also demonstrate Shia favorability towards Russia and antipathy towards the United States.

While an overwhelming majority of Lebanese Sunni and Shia continue to rate relations with China as important, rankings among Lebanese Christians on this metric dropped in the most recent poll: 49% of Lebanese Christians called relations with China important in March 2022, while 60% of Lebanese Christians called these relations important just four months earlier. In the same vein, when asked about the Olympics in Beijing, 38% of both Sunni and Shia saw this as positive, compared to just 30% of Lebanese Christians.



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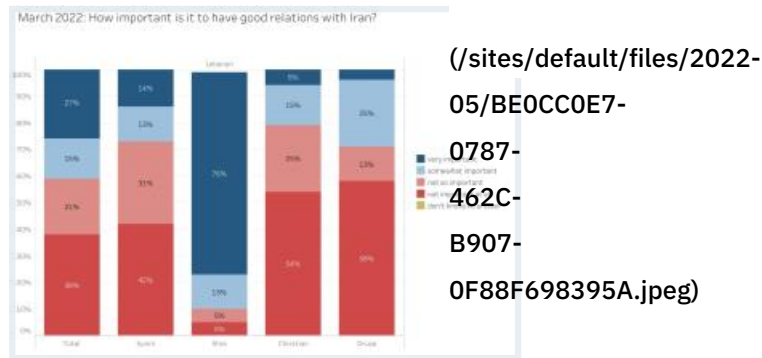
### Great powers’ policy priorities

Polling demonstrated little intra- and inter-sectarian consensus regarding what Lebanese respondents think the foreign policy priorities of Russia, China and the United States toward Lebanon should be. When asked to choose what should be the most important aspect of Russia's policies toward Lebanon, a plurality of Shia chose providing advanced weapons for our armed forces, and a plurality of Sunni and slim plurality of Christians chose showing respect for our religion and culture.

When asked the same question about China, a plurality of Shia also chose providing advanced weapons for our armed forces, while slim pluralities of Sunni and Christian respondents chose providing investment, trade, and construction projects. Regarding the United States, there was clearer consensus on the matter; half of Shia chose showing respect for our religion and culture, and a majority of Sunni and clear plurality of Christians chose providing advanced weapons for our armed forces.

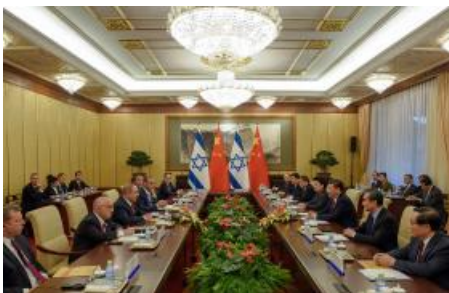
## Relations with Iran

Across the board, there was a steady increase in Lebanese rankings of relations with outside powers as “important,” regardless of sectarian dynamics—a trend that extended to the divisive topic of relations with Iran. Surprisingly, in the 2022 poll, there was a jump in terms of Sunni support for relations with Iran. 27% of Lebanese Sunni ranked ties with Iran as somewhat or very important—a clear jump from 17% in 2021, 21% in 2019, 15% in 2018 and 16% in 2017. Among Lebanese Shia, support for ties with Iran remained highly popular, with 89% of Lebanese Shia saying relations with Iran were somewhat or very important. Meanwhile, Lebanese Christians have expressed increasingly unfavorable perceptions of Iran, with just 21% calling ties important in the most recent poll, a clear drop from 26% in 2021, 33% in 2019, and 38% in 2018.



Yet in response to the intentionally provocative statement, “Wherever Iran intervenes, it hurts the local Arabs and doesn’t help the Palestinians,” 67% of Lebanese Sunni and 56% of Lebanese Christians agreed, compared to 14% of Lebanese Shia. Notably, this is an increase from the 57% of Lebanese Sunni who agreed with this statement in 2021. This finding, combined with the increase in Sunni respondents who ranked ties with Iran as important, likely indicates that Iran is increasingly seen as a formidable power, regardless of Lebanese perceptions about its governance style, foreign policy, and assistance towards Palestinians. Iran’s status as an important regional power may be bolstered by its recent attacks on targets in the UAE and Iraq and its ability to stall the JCPOA negotiations in Vienna. The seemingly contradictory findings may also be a result of Lebanon’s deteriorating internal situation, as ties with outside powers are seen as increasingly important to ameliorate the ongoing crisis. ❖

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