

# New Saudi Poll Shows Biden's Visit Barely Budgeted Skepticism

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

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

*Editorial*

*note:* [For the most recent polling data from Saudi Arabia, see our November 2022 data here \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-saudi-poll-some-surprises-us-iran-israel-oil-and-more\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-saudi-poll-some-surprises-us-iran-israel-oil-and-more).

## The Saudi public gave mixed reviews on issues such as normalization and ties with the United States, but remained mostly united regarding Russia's actions in Ukraine and relations with Iran.

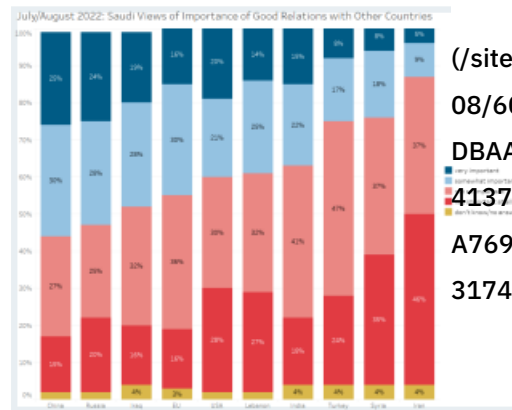
A special Saudi public opinion poll, commissioned by the Washington Institute and conducted by a regional commercial survey firm July 20-August 11, 2022, reveals that the mid-July visit by U.S. President Joe Biden had virtually no effect on Saudi popular attitudes toward the United States, normalization with Israel, or any other issues.

The Saudi public remains hostile toward Iran, and largely opposed to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Even so, a narrow majority value good ties with Russia; and a surprisingly large minority (around 40%) would welcome a new nuclear deal with Iran. Even more surprisingly, half of Saudis now say that "the economic situation in our country is generally bad, and will probably stay that way." Generational or sectarian differences remain surprisingly marginal, with a few exceptions noted below.

### United States Now Lags Behind China and Russia in Perceived Importance to Saudi Arabia

Just over 40% of Saudi citizens say good relations with the United States are at least "somewhat" important to their country, about the same as in earlier recent surveys. Asked specifically about Biden's visit, only one-fourth see any positive effect. And the majority (59%) of Saudis, as before, agree with this assertion: "We cannot count on the United States these days, so we should look more to Russia and China as partners."

In fact, the United States is currently outranked in perceived importance to Saudis by both China (55%) and Russia (52%)—and even by the EU (46%). Among major foreign powers, India ranks just below the United States, with 37% saying good ties with New Delhi are important to Saudi Arabia.

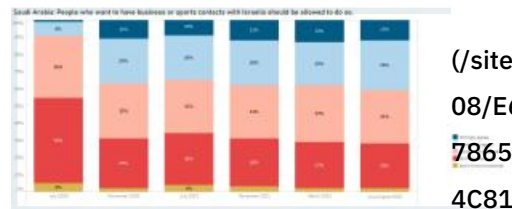


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When queried about priorities for U.S. policy toward their country, Saudis offer mixed responses. “Helping us to resolve regional conflicts diplomatically” comes in first; a very close second is “providing advanced weapons for our armed forces.” Trailing a bit behind, rather unexpectedly, are two other options: “providing investment, trade, and construction projects”; or “showing respect for our religion and culture.”

**Normalization with Israel Continues to Get Mixed Reviews**

Saudi popular attitudes toward normalization with Israel and the Abraham Accords also remain very mixed. Forty-two percent agree that “people who want to have business or sports contacts with Israelis should be allowed to do so.” This proportion had doubled right after the Abraham Accords were officially announced in the fall of 2020; and it has since remained stable, even in the immediate aftermath of Israeli military reprisals in Gaza in May 2021 and again just this past July.



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But the majority (57%) still reject ties with Israelis, including 26% “strongly” opposed. This is one of the few issues on which a generational difference is statistically significant: among adults under 30, 46% accept contacts with Israelis; while among those over 30, that figure dips to 39%. At the same time, regarding the official Abraham Accords between several other Arab states and Israel, only around a quarter of Saudis see any positive effects on the region. This figure is nearly unchanged over the past year, and with very little difference between younger and older Saudis.

**Little Interest in Better Ties with Tehran, But Surprisingly Nuanced Views of Nuclear Deal**

On Iran, in sharp contrast, a mere 14% of Saudis say good relations are even “somewhat” important to their own country. This is a rare issue on which a sectarian divergence is evident, albeit a modest one: among the small Saudi Shia minority, 22% would value good ties with Tehran. The majority (57%) of Saudis overall voice a negative view of a new nuclear deal with Iran. Nevertheless, an unexpectedly large minority (39%) say this would have at least a somewhat positive effect on the region, again with the Shia minority slightly more in favor.

**Solid Majority Still Oppose Russian Invasion of Ukraine, Blame It for High Food Costs**

Nearly three-quarters of Saudis, roughly as in the March 2022 survey, express a negative opinion about “the Russian military actions in Ukraine. Around two-thirds also agree that Russia’s move is “to blame for the recent rise in food prices here.” This relatively strong and steady sentiment stands in stark contrast to the simultaneous view, shared by more than half of Saudis, that good relations with Russia remain important. Such mixed attitudes undoubtedly help account for Saudi Arabia’s continued courting of Russia and cautious policy toward the Ukrainian crisis.

### **Half Are Pessimistic About Saudi Economy; Almost Half Now Favor “Moderate” Islam**

On domestic issues, an unexpected finding from this survey is that half of Saudi citizens voice pessimism about a “generally bad economic situation in our country,” including 22% who feel “strongly” that way. This view is shared almost equally among the younger and older generations. This sentiment—quite counter-intuitive, in light of the heavy outside focus on rising oil revenues—may stem from the Saudis’ perception of higher food prices, cited above.

On a more positive note, 42% of Saudi adults, young and old alike, currently agree with this assertion: “We should listen to those among us who are trying to interpret Islam in a more moderate, tolerant, and modern way.” This view has been inching slowly but steadily upwards in polls conducted over the past five years. Today it is especially notable because this poll was taken around the time of the hajj (annual pilgrimage to Mecca), with some controversy over the choice of leading moderate Sheikh Mohammed Al-Issa to deliver the main sermon there.



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### **Methodological Note**

These findings are from a personal interview survey, conducted July 20-August 11, 2022, among a nationally representative sample of 1,000 Saudi citizens, randomly selected according to standard geographic probability procedures. It was conducted by an highly reputable and experienced independent, regional commercial firm, with strict quality controls and assurances of confidentiality. The estimated statistical margin of error for a sample of this size and nature is plus or minus 3 percentage points. Additional methodological information, including full questionnaire and data tables, is readily available on the new interactive polling data platform on [Fikra Forum \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/twi-interactive-polling-platform\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/twi-interactive-polling-platform). ❖

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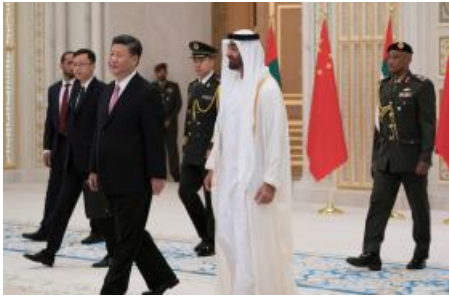
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