

Sunnis and Shia in Bahrain: New Survey Shows Both Conflict and Consensus

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Brief Analysis

Though political tensions exist between Bahrain's Sunni elite and its Shia majority, polling suggests that public opinion on several key foreign policy issues is quite close between these two groups.

For David Pollock's most recent polling of Bahrain from April 2023, click [here](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-bahrain-poll-reveals-support-russia-entente-iran-split-israel) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/new-bahrain-poll-reveals-support-russia-entente-iran-split-israel>).

The small but very strategic island nation of Bahrain, just off the Saudi Gulf coast, has witnessed a great deal of sectarian tension throughout much of the past decade: a Sunni-dominated monarchy and elite, often in opposition to the Shia majority of the population. The true nature and extent of this cleavage have long been shrouded in mystery and mutual polemics. But now a rare new public opinion poll, probably the only one ever to quantify these sectarian differences objectively, sheds some unaccustomed light on this obscure yet important issue.

It turns out, quite counterintuitively, that the country's Sunni elite and Shia "street" actually hold very similar, generally positive views about coexistence, both with each other and with their Arab neighbors. They also tend to agree about the importance of good ties with Washington, and about promoting Palestinian-Israeli peace. But Bahrain's Sunni and Shia citizens demonstrably diverge sharply in their attitudes toward Iran's policies and proxies in the region.

The first question at stake here, however, is a deceptively simple factual one: what is the real Shia to Sunni ratio among Bahrain's roughly 700,000 citizens? The answer, provided by this random sample of 1,000 Bahrainis, is 62 percent Shia and 38 percent Sunni. This finding confirms, in much more precise fashion, the conventional estimate of a Shia majority and Sunni minority population. Bahrain also hosts a small number of citizens of other religions,

including a few Jewish families.

Despite the usual focus on sectarian differences, this survey reveals several major issues on which Bahrain's Sunnis and Shia generally agree. Three-fourths of both sects say that "Arabs should work harder on behalf of coexistence and cooperation" between them. A narrower majority of each community, 56 percent, also agree that "right now, internal political and economic reform is more important for our country than any foreign policy issue." And around half the country's Sunnis and Shia alike—considerably more than in most other Arab countries polled lately—say that "we should listen to those among us who are trying to interpret Islam in a more moderate, tolerant, and modern direction."

Other, more surprising areas of consensus concern relations with the United States, and potentially even with Israel. A mere 15 percent of either Sunnis or Shia voice a favorable view of American Mideast policy. But a much larger proportion, around half in both communities, say it is "important for our country to have good relations with the United States." This augurs well for the future of that relationship, which includes a major American naval base, despite continuing domestic political and sectarian tensions on the island.

On a follow-up question about their desired priority for U.S. foreign policy, Bahrainis of both sects divide their votes among several regional challenges: Iran, Yemen, Palestine, and terrorism, in that order of preference. Notably, only a small minority of either sect—11 percent of Sunnis, and 16 percent of Shia—say their top priority is for the United States to "reduce its interference in the region."

Concerning the much more remote prospect of ties with Israel, about which Bahrain's rulers have reportedly expressed some guarded private optimism lately, the public seems to distinguish between supporting Israeli-Palestinian peace and actual overtures to the Jewish state. Two-thirds of Bahrain's Sunni and Shia alike agree that "Arab states should play a new role in Palestinian-Israeli peace talks, offering both sides incentives to take more moderate positions." But asked about immediate "cooperation with Israel on other issues like technology, counter-terrorism or containing Iran," only about 15 percent of either group express a positive opinion.

On another contentious issue much closer to home, the intra-Arab dispute with neighboring Qatar, Bahrain's Sunni and Shia publics also generally share views very similar to each other— and very different from their own government's official position. Around two-thirds of both Sunni and Shia citizens of Bahrain oppose the current "Arab quartet" boycott of Qatar, in which Bahrain is joined with Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt. Instead, three-quarters of each sectarian community want a compromise with Qatar, "in which all the parties make some concessions to each other to reach a middle ground." Here Bahraini public opinion as a whole resembles that in the other GCC countries polled (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Qatar itself)—in all of which solid majorities desire a compromise, even as their governments so far refuse. The divergence is a telling indicator of the limits of public opinion as a policy determinant in these still largely autocratic states.

These intriguing areas of consensus offer a dramatic contrast with other areas, where the views of Bahrain's two major Muslim sects are very sharply at odds. Asked their views of Iran's regional policies, precisely 2 percent of Bahraini Sunnis voice even a "somewhat positive" attitude. But 68 percent of their Shia compatriots view Iran's policies favorably. Similarly, a mere 5 percent of Sunnis, but 60 percent of Shia, say it is important for Bahrain to maintain good relations with Iran. And conversely, 63 percent of the Sunnis, compared with just 23 percent of the Shia, say that "the most important issue" in the dispute with Qatar is "to find the maximum degree of Arab cooperation against Iran."

By comparison, attitudes toward Iran's regional allies show somewhat less divergence between Bahrain's two major sects. Hezbollah is viewed negatively by fully 95 percent of the country's Sunnis—but also by 62 percent of its Shia. And the Houthis of Yemen are disapproved by 90 percent of the Sunnis—and by 71 percent of the Shia as well.

Conversely, the Sunni fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood, which operates openly in Bahrain, is seen favorably by 32 percent of the Sunnis there; while exactly 0 percent of Bahraini Shia express a positive opinion of that exclusionary organization.

All in all, these survey findings paint a significantly more nuanced picture of the well-known sectarian cleavage in this mixed and “politically polarized” society. On some key questions, a surprising degree of convergence is evident, despite the prevailing tensions—though not necessarily in favor of existing government policy. Iran and related issues, however, remain real bones of contention on which the Shia majority of the population clearly differs, both from official policy and from the views of the country’s ruling Sunni minority. At the same time, there is relatively little sympathy among Bahrain’s Shia for Iran’s violent militia allies in the ongoing sectarian proxy wars elsewhere in the region. The common popular desire for compromise and coexistence could, therefore, be a basis for relative stability, and perhaps ultimately even for political reconciliation.

This survey, sponsored by the Washington Institute, was conducted in August by a reputable regional commercial firm, using face-to-face, in-home interviews with a representative multi-stage geographic probability national sample of 1,000 Bahraini citizens. The statistical margin of error is approximately 3 percent. Full methodological details, including access to the raw data file, are available on request. ❖

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