



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Research Paper | 22 December 2020

Arab Opinion Toward Iran 2019/2020

Mehran Kamrava and Hamideh Dorzadeh

Iranian Studies Unit

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Series: [Research Paper](#)

22 December 2020

Mehran Kamarava

Heads the Iranian Studies Unit at the Arab Center for Policy Studies and Research. He is also Professor of Government at Georgetown University Qatar. He is the author of a number of journal articles and books, including, most recently, A Concise History of Revolution and Inside the Arab State.

Hamideh Dorzadeh

The Coordinator of the Iranian Studies Unit at the Arab Center for Policy Studies and Research. She received her Bachelor's degree from Georgetown University and is currently pursuing her MA in Women, Society and Development program at Hamad Bin Khalifa University.

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

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Iran has a serious image problem in the Arab world. According to the most recent data made available by the Arab Opinion Index, a majority of citizens in the Arab world view Iran in negative terms. Not only is Iranian foreign policy viewed negatively across the Arab world, Iran consistently ranks high as one of the biggest threats to the Arab world. Iran's nuclear program is perceived as a source of regional instability, its policy toward Palestine, Syria, and Yemen is considered as highly disruptive to regional peace, and the country is seen as a major source of regional sectarianism and ethnic separatist tendencies across the Arab world.

This paper examines Arab attitudes toward Iran as revealed through the 2019-2020 and 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, compiled from public opinion surveys in thirteen Arab countries by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. The countries surveyed in 2019-2020 included Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Tunisia. Based on the data in the surveys, some of the key findings are as follows:

- Since 2011, Iranian foreign policy has steadily been seen in the Arab world as a major source of instability and as a rising threat. In most Arab countries, Iran is viewed as the third largest threat to the Arab world, following Israel and the United States, though in Saudi Arabia nearly twice as many people consider Iran as a major threat as compared to Israel.
- While mostly supportive of the Iranian nuclear program prior to 2011, today most Arabs approve of the American withdrawal from the comprehensive nuclear agreement that was signed between Iran and the EU+3 in 2015.
- Nearly twice as many Arabs consistently consider Iranian policies toward Palestine, Syria, and Yemen to be bad or very bad as compared to those who consider them to be good or very good.
- A majority of Arabs believe Iran fuels sectarian and ethnic separatist tendencies in the Arab world.

Iran in the Arab World Before 2011

Arab perceptions toward Iran were not always negative. Until the Arab uprisings of 2011, Iran, and more specifically Iranian leaders, were seen in a relatively positive light in most Arab countries. In a poll conducted in six Arab countries in 2006, for example, Iranian President Ahmadinejad was the third most admired world leader, behind Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and French President Jacques Chirac. Prior to 2011, Ahmadinejad consistently remained the third most admired leader—for example in 2008 behind Hassan Nasrallah and Bashar al-Assad, and in 2011 behind Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Nasrallah.⁽¹⁾

Other aspects of Iranian foreign and security policy were also viewed in positive terms. In 2006, for example, 64 percent of the respondents believed “Iran has the right to its nuclear program,” while only 24 percent agreed that “Iran should be pressured to stop its nuclear program.” This is despite

¹ Data drawn from the 2008 and 2011, Shibley Telhami, Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey, (Baltimore, MD: University of Maryland, 2008 and 2011).



the fact that 51 percent of those surveyed believed that “Iran is trying to develop nuclear weapons,” and only 27 percent thought “Iran is conducting research for peaceful nuclear purposes.”⁽²⁾ In 2008, a total of 44 percent of all respondents surveyed believed that “if Iran acquired nuclear weapons, the outcome would be more positive” for the Middle East. Significantly, the highest percentage of respondents who answered in the affirmative to this question, 73 percent, were in Saudi Arabia, followed by those in the UAE at 51 percent. Some 67 percent of those polled believed “Iran has the right to its nuclear program and the international pressure [on the country] should cease.” In Saudi Arabia, the positive response to this question was 71 percent.⁽³⁾ Today, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are considered Iran’s main adversaries in the Middle East, and some of the highest negative responses about Iran in the latest poll come from Saudi citizens.

Attitudes toward Iran had already started to shift by 2011. In a 2011 poll, nearly 69 percent of respondents in six Arab countries reported unfavorable views toward the Islamic Republic.⁽⁴⁾ The highest unfavorable views of Iran were reported in Saudi Arabia at 80 percent. In the same survey, 95 percent of Saudis disagreed with the statement that “Iran contributes to peace and stability in the Arab world,” followed by 80 percent of respondent in the UAE.⁽⁵⁾ Along similar lines, 97 percent of Saudis and 89 percent of respondents in the UAE agreed that “the Arab Gulf states are right to be concerned with Iran’s nuclear program because this program only makes the region less secure.”⁽⁶⁾

The critical turning point in Arab attitudes toward Iran around 2011 appears to be Iran’s position in relation to the evolving direction of the Arab uprisings, especially Iranian policies in Syria. By the middle of 2011, two reinforcing developments begin to occur that significantly blacken Iran’s image in Arab eyes. First, Iran’s unconditional support for Bashar al-Assad, and the corresponding escalation of violence in Syria, placed the Islamic Republic in direct opposition to the hopes and aspirations of millions of Arabs for whom the Arab Spring finally offered promise of a better future. In their official narrative, Tehran’s politicians even refused to refer to an “Arab Spring” as the Arab masses themselves saw the uprisings, and called them an “Islamic Awakening” instead.

Second, as 2011 wore on, and as the wave of anti-government protests started to threaten Gulf monarchies, local ruling elites began to appeal to the sectarian sensibilities of their populations in order to undermine possibilities for the emergence of cross-sectarian, national opposition fronts. This was spearheaded by the ruling families of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, but soon it was also picked up by sectarian identity entrepreneurs and by “political, religious, social, and economic elites who

2 Data drawn from, Shibley Telhami, 2006 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey, (Baltimore, MD: University of Maryland, 2007). The countries surveyed included Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

3 Shibley Telhami, 2008 Annual Arab Public Opinion Survey, (Baltimore, MD: University of Maryland, 2008).

4 James Zogby, Arab Attitudes Toward Iran, 2011, (Washington, DC: Arab American Institute Foundation, 2011), p. 4. Countries included in this survey were Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

5 Ibid., p. 5.

6 Ibid., p. 9.



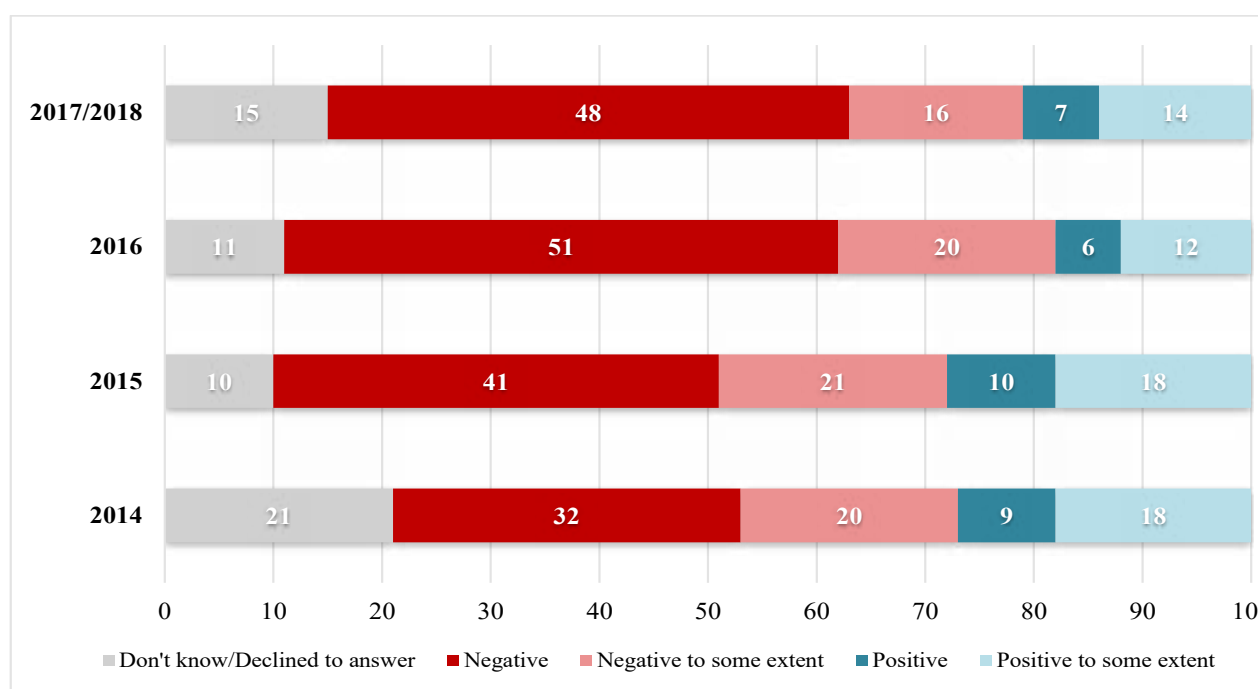
all used sectarianism to further their personal aims.”⁽⁷⁾ Iran only played along with this incipient sectarianism, fanning its flames with incendiary rhetoric against Riyadh and Manama, sending “advisors” and “volunteers” to bolster Bashar al-Assad’s forces, framing its anti-Daesh campaign in sectarian terms, and forming the “Fatemiyoun” and “Zeynabiyoun” divisions, made up of Shia Afghan and Pakistani recruits respectively, to fight in Syria. By the time the Saudi embassy in Tehran was attacked by a mob in January 2016, the Islamic Republic had become as much of a sectarian actor as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia had become earlier.

Ironically, whereas prior to the Arab Spring sectarian considerations did not figure in the calculations of most of the Arabs polled—with high levels of admiration for Shia politicians like Nasrallah, Ahmadinejad, and al-Assad—after the Arab Spring, sectarianism became pervasive throughout the Middle East. And, as the data presented here indicates (figs. 3, 4, 10, 12, 14, 15, and 27-36), most Arabs placed the responsibility for the region’s sectarian wave squarely on Iran. Assumptions about Iranian responsibility for heightened sectarianism are part of a much broader trend in which Iran is perceived as a major, if not the major, source of threat to the region.

Perceptions of the Iranian Threat

Negative perceptions about Iranian foreign policy have steadily grown across the Arab region. As figure 1 indicates, whereas in 2014 slightly more than half of respondents, 52 percent, saw Iranian foreign policy as negative, the prevalence of negative perceptions grew steadily to 62 percent in 2015, 71 percent in 2016, and 64 percent in 2017-2018.

Figure 1. Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Arab Region

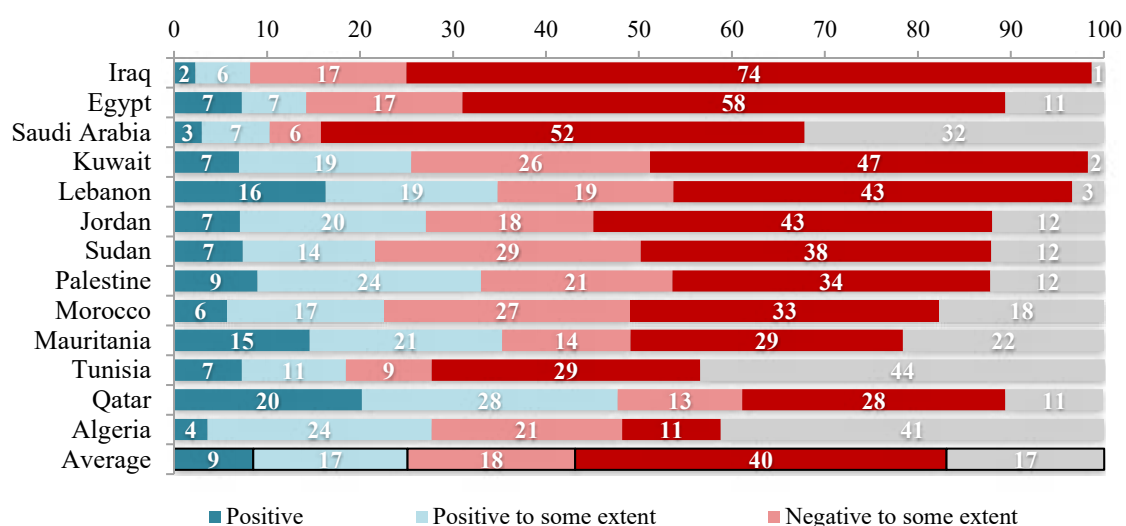


Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018), p. 312.

⁷ Toby Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that Wasn't*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 9.

By 2019-2020, as shown in figure 2, negative Arab regional perceptions toward Iranian foreign policy had slightly reduced from their 2016 peak, to average 58 percent, while remaining high in each of Egypt at 75 percent, Kuwait at 73 percent, and Saudi Arabia at 62 percent. Significantly, 32 percent of Saudi respondents did not know or refused to answer to the question. Negative views toward Iranian foreign policy were especially high in Iraq, where no less than 91 percent of respondents registered negative or somewhat negative responses. One outlier is Qatar, where favorable views toward Iran, at 48 percent, outnumber negative ones, at 41 percent. This is most likely a result of relatively friendly relations between the two countries, especially after the GCC crisis in 2017, when for a time Iran became Qatar’s only air corridor to the outside world, with an uptick in Iran-Qatar trade. Nonetheless, as the data in table 2 and figure 4 below demonstrate, a sizeable percentage of Qataris continue to consider Iran to be “the most threatening” country to the security of the Arab world.

Figure 2. Iran’s Foreign Policy Toward Respondent’s Countries (2019-2020)



Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2020), p. 13.

Not only are there pervasive negative perceptions toward Iranian foreign policy in Arab countries, most Arabs perceive of Iran as a major threat to the security of the Arab world. As table 1 indicates, since 2011 Iran has consistently been seen as the third largest threat to the security of the Arab world. Significantly, whereas perception of Israel as the biggest threat to the Arab world has steadily declined since 2011, from 51 percent in 2011 to 37 percent in 2019-2020, that of Iran has increased from 4 percent in 2011 to 12 percent in 2019-2020.



Table 1. Most Threatening Countries to the Security of the Arab World

Country	2019/2020	2017 /2018	2016	2015	2014	2012 / 2013	2011
Israel	37	39	41	45	42	52	51
United States	29	28	27	22	24	21	22
Iran	12	10	10	10	9	6	4
Arab Countries	5	7	5	5	5	3	2
Russia	1	2	3	1	--	--	--
European Countries	1	1	1	1	2	1	--
Other Countries	1	1	1	1	1	0.3	1
Other	1	0	1	1	0.1	--	0.2
There is no source of threat	2	4	1	1	1	1	0.4
Don't know/ Declined to answer	11	8	9	12	17	15	19

Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2020), p. 32.

Table 2 presents a country-specific breakdown of perceived threats toward the Arab world in 2019-2020. As the table indicates, perceptions of Iran as a threat to the Arab world tend to be lowest in countries of the Maghreb: 0.5 percent in Algeria, 1.7 percent in Tunisia, and 6.6 percent in both Morocco and Mauritania. In Iraq, however, 18.5 percent of those polled considered Iran as a threat to the security of the Arab world (28.8 percent named Israel and 39.5 percent named the US as threats). Significantly, while more than 33 percent of Saudi respondents have declined to answer or did not know, 28 percent of Saudis named Iran as the biggest threat to the Arab world, about twice as many as those who named Israel (14.5 percent) and considerably more than those who named the US (9.9 percent).

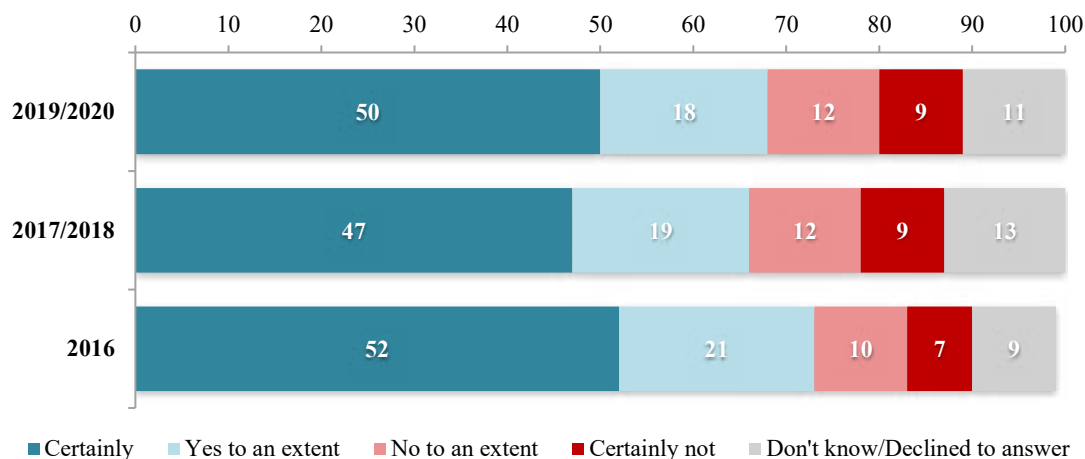
Table 2. Most Threatening Countries to the Security of the Arab World, 2019-2020

Country respondent	Israel	United States	Iran	Arab Countries	Russia	European Countries	Other Countries	Turkey	Don't know/ Declined to answer	There is no source of threat
Kuwait	50.8	31	10.2	0.6	0.8	0.1	0.4	0.3	4.4	1.5
Mauritania	48.5	21	6.6	3.4	0.5	1	0.3	0	18.7	0
Jordan	47.6	28.4	9.5	5	0.3	0.1	0.3	0.1	6.5	2.2
Algeria	46.4	33.4	0.5	4.5	0	0.7	0	0.1	13.5	0.8
Sudan	44	29.5	15	2.8	1.7	0.5	0.8	0.6	4.9	0.3
Morocco	38.7	20.8	6.6	2.7	2.4	0.4	3	0.6	15.6	9.3
Lebanon	38.0	34.3	17.8	3	0.3	0	0.6	0.6	4.9	0.7
Egypt	32.5	26.5	13.4	3.9	2.1	2	0.8	12.2	4.8	1.9
Tunisia	31.8	21.5	1.7	16	0.2	1.5	0	0.4	27	0
Iraq	28.8	39.5	18.5	4	1.9	0.2	0	1.3	5.8	0
Palestine	28.6	51	7.4	7.1	1	0.3	0.1	0.3	4.3	0
Saudi Arabia	14.5	9.9	28.1	6.1	0.6	0.3	0.3	0.6	33.6	6.1
Qatar	28.0	27	21	6	0	0	0	0	10.0	7.0
Average	37	29	12	5	1	1	1	1	11	2

Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2020), p. 30.

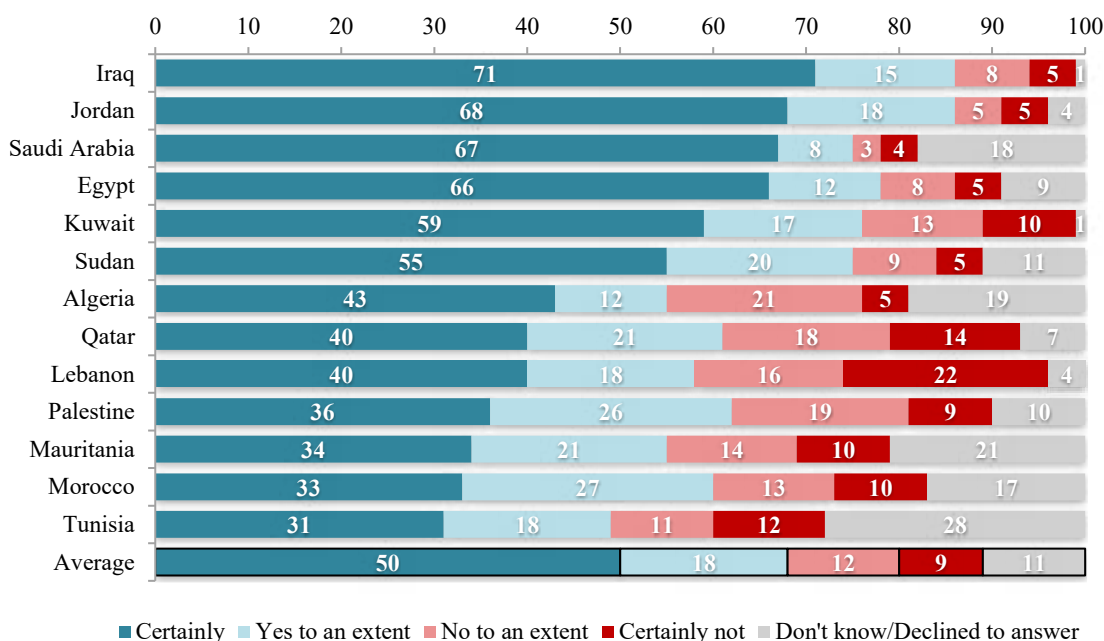
Across the Arab world, perceptions of Iranian threat have ranged between 73 percent in 2016 to 68 percent in 2019-2020 (fig. 3). Nevertheless, as the data in figure 4 demonstrate, in Iraq no less than 86 percent of respondents consider Iran to be a threat to the security and stability of the region.⁽⁸⁾ A similar percentage of Jordanians hold the same views toward Iran, followed by 75 percent of respondents in Saudi Arabia.

Figure 3. Do Iranian policies pose a threat to the security and stability of the Arab region? (2019-2020)



Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2020).

Figure 4. Do Iranian policies pose a threat to the security and stability of the Arab region? (2019-2020)

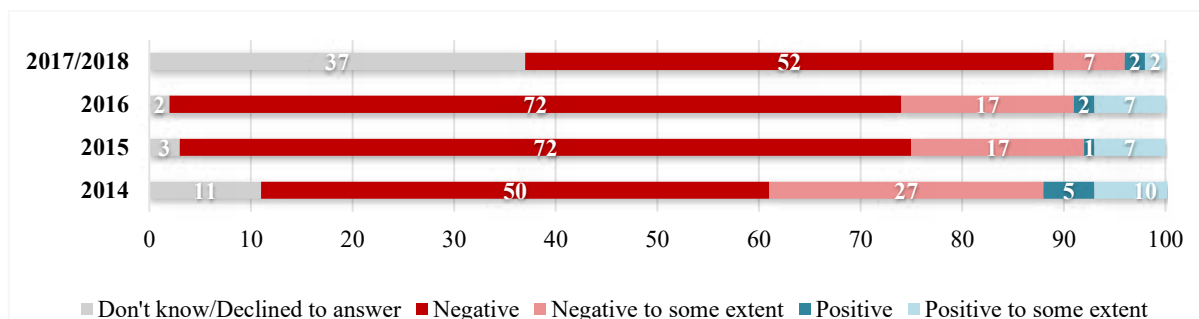


Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2020).

⁸ As figure 10 below shows, Iraqi views toward Iranian foreign policy are highly divided along sectarian lines.

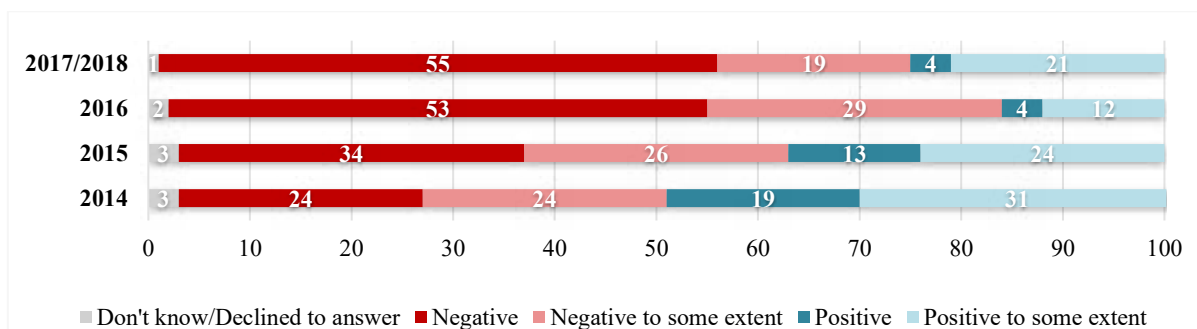
Figures 5-19 offer country-specific perceptions of Iranian foreign policy. Comparatively, the most negative perceptions toward Iran’s foreign policy exist in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Egypt (figs. 5-7).

Figure 5. Saudi Arabia: Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Arab Region



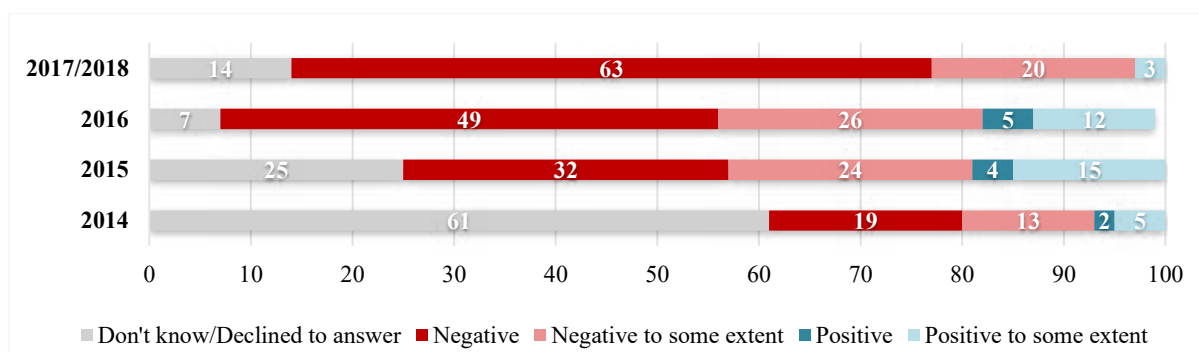
Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018), p. 310.

Figure 6. Kuwait: Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Arab Region



Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018), p. 310.

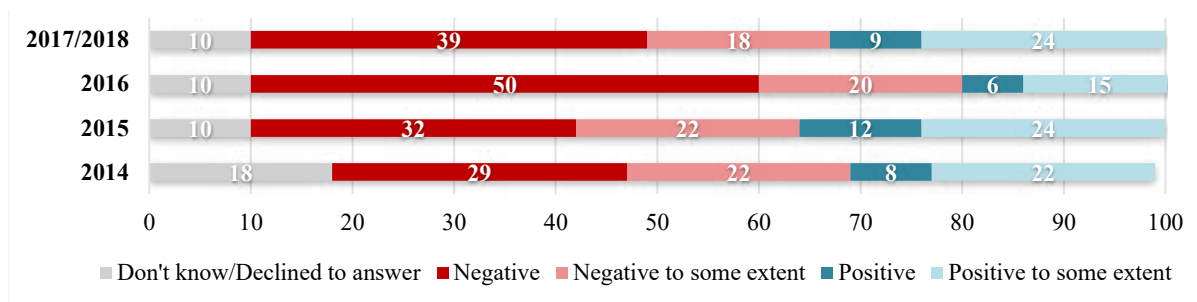
Figure 7. Egypt: Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Arab Region



Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018), p. 310.

Iran’s staunch advocacy of the Palestinian cause and its adversarial relationship with Israel has not helped assumptions about its foreign policy in Palestine. In 2017/2018, 57 percent of Palestinians held negative or somewhat negative views toward Iran (fig. 8).

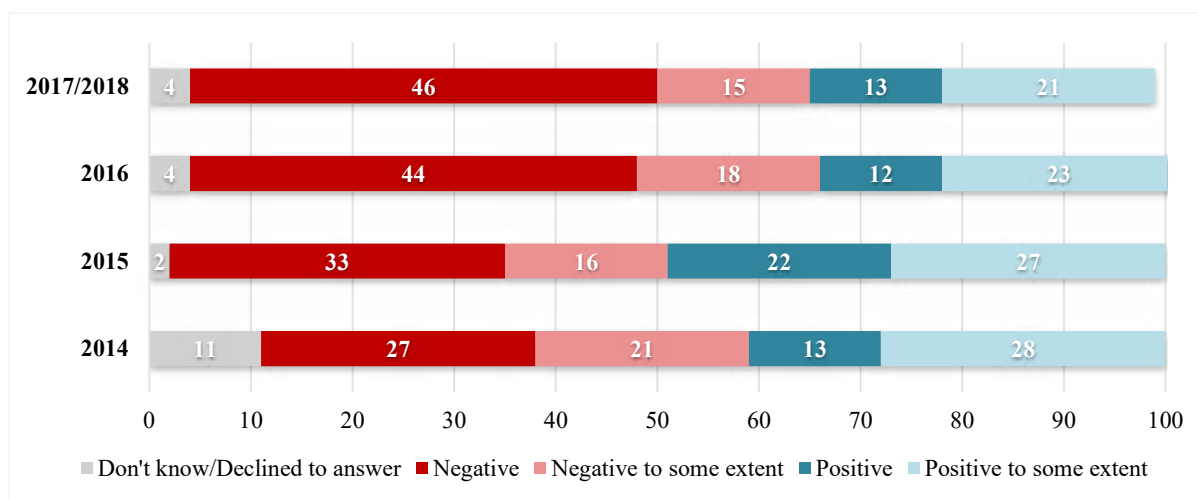
Figure 8. Palestine: Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Arab Region



Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018), p. 310.

Neither has Iran’s involvement in Iraq, especially its close relations with the country’s Shia politicians and militia groups, necessarily helped perceptions of its foreign policy in its neighbor to the west. In 2017/2018, a total of 61 percent of Iraqis, both Shia and Sunni, saw Iranian foreign policy in the Arab world in a negative light, up from 48 percent in 2014 (fig. 9).

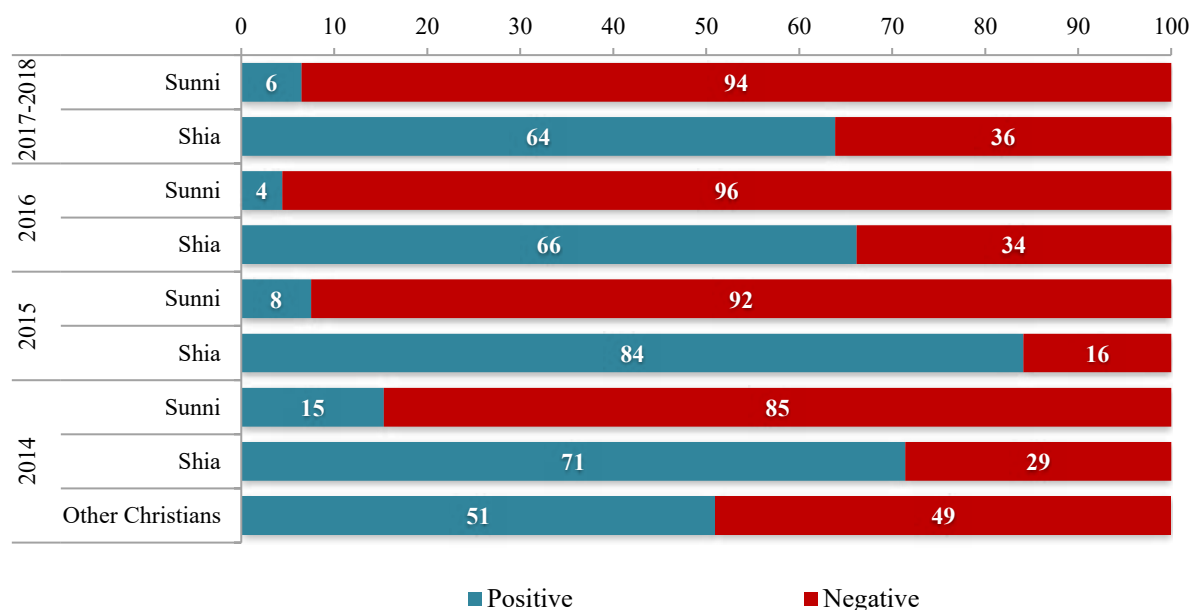
Figure 9. Iraq: Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Arab Region



Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018), p. 310.

When Iraqi views of Iranian policy toward the Arab region are broken down along sectarian lines, the differences in Shia and Sunni perceptions of Iranian policy are quite stark (fig. 10). Between 2014 and 2018, on average 92 percent of Iraqi Sunnis perceived of Iranian policy toward the region negatively whereas 71 percent of Iraqi Shia viewed it positively.

Figure 10. Iraq: Iran's Foreign Policy in the Arab Region

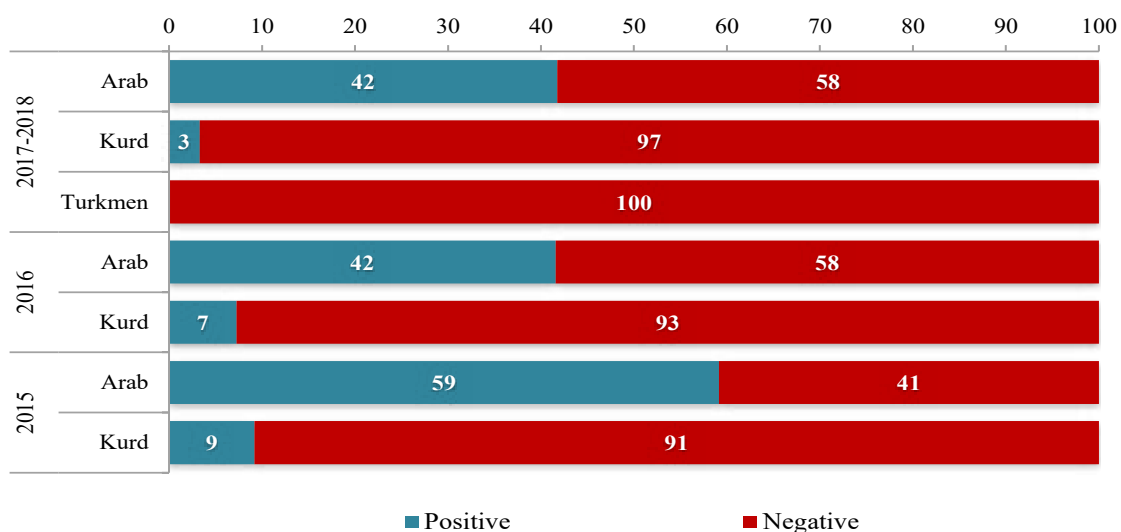


Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018).

Similarly, Iraqi Kurds and Turkmen had by far more negative perceptions of Iranian policy toward the Arab region than their Arab compatriots (fig. 11). Whereas on average about 48 percent of Iraqi Arabs, both Shia and Sunni had positive views of Iranian policy toward the Arab region between 2015 and 2018, only 6 percent of Iraqi Kurds shared the same view. Kurdish Iraqis' views of Iranian policy toward the Arab region declined from 9 percent in 2015 to 7 percent in 2016 and 3 percent in 2017/2018, perhaps a reflection of Iran's determined efforts to ensure a negative outcome to the Kurdish vote for autonomy in September 2017.⁽⁹⁾ Significantly, in 2017/2018, 100 percent of the Iraqi Turkmen surveyed held negative views toward Iranian policy in the Arab region.

⁹ The referendum's positive vote for Kurdish autonomy was followed by the central government in Baghdad, Ankara and Tehran threatening the imposition of punitive sanctions against Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region. The fact that the campaign to achieve for Kurdish independence through the ballot box was ultimately defeated with Iranian assistance largely shaped Iraqi Kurdish views toward Iran. See, Fahrettin Sumer and Jay Joseph, "The paradox of the Iraqi Kurdish referendum on independence: Contradictions and hopes for economic prosperity," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 4, (2018), pp. 574-588; and, Nader Entessar, "Uneasy Neighbors: Iran and the Kurdish Regional Government," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (Winter 2018), pp. 73-84.

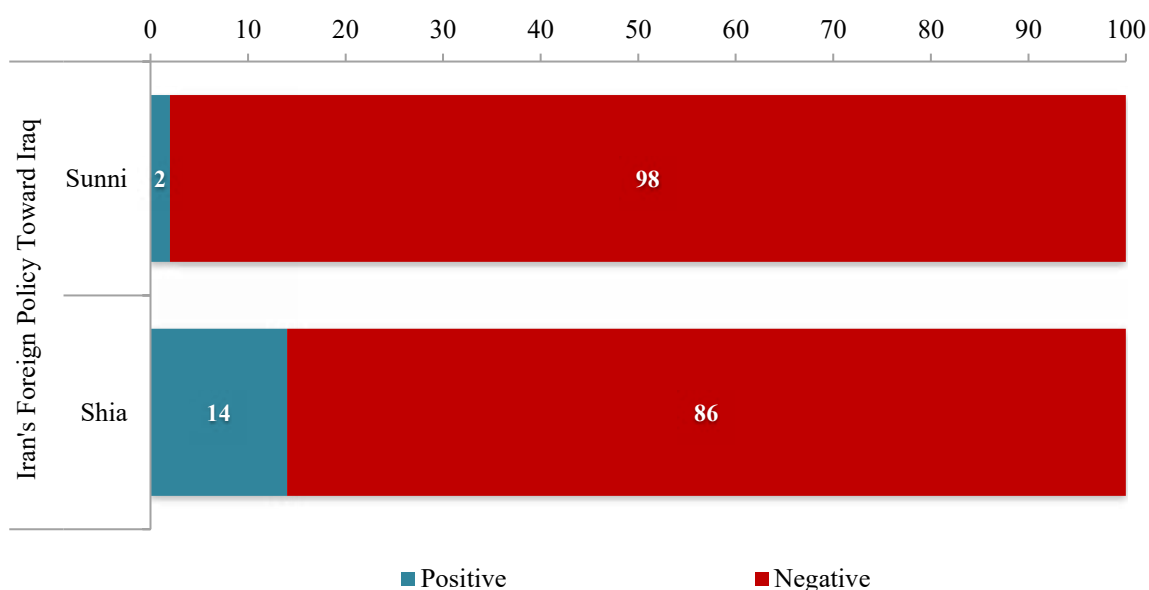
Figure 11. Iraq: Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Arab Region



Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018).

When it comes to Iranian policies toward Iraq in particular, Iraqi Sunni perceptions are far more negative (fig. 12). In 2019/2020, only 14 percent of Iraqi Shia viewed Iranian policy toward their country positively. Among Iraqi Sunnis, positive perceptions of Iranian policy toward Iraq did not exceed 2 percent.

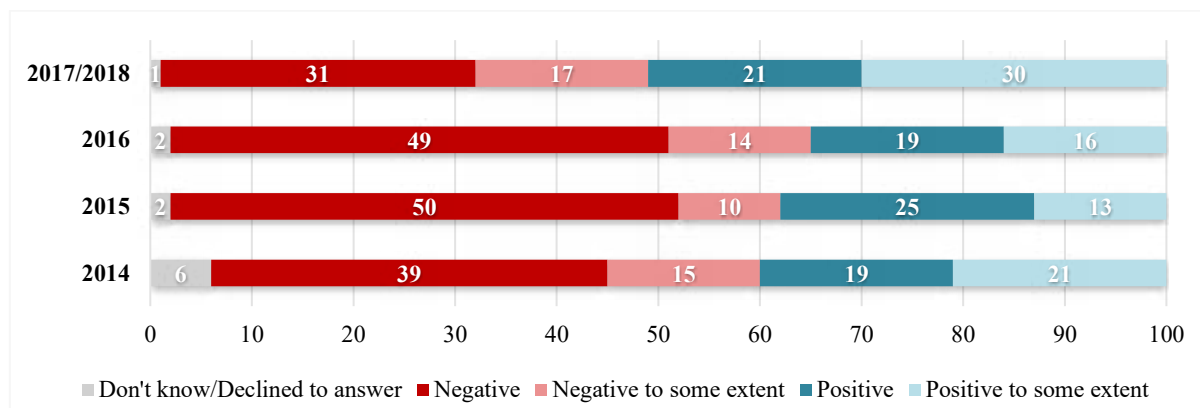
Figure 12. Iraq: Iran’s Foreign Policy Toward Respondent’s Countries, 2019/2020



Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2020).

In Lebanon, where Iran maintains close military and political ties with Hezbollah, negative views toward Iranian foreign policy are slightly less pervasive among all Lebanese, ranging from 60 percent in 2015 to 48 percent in 2017/18 (fig. 13).

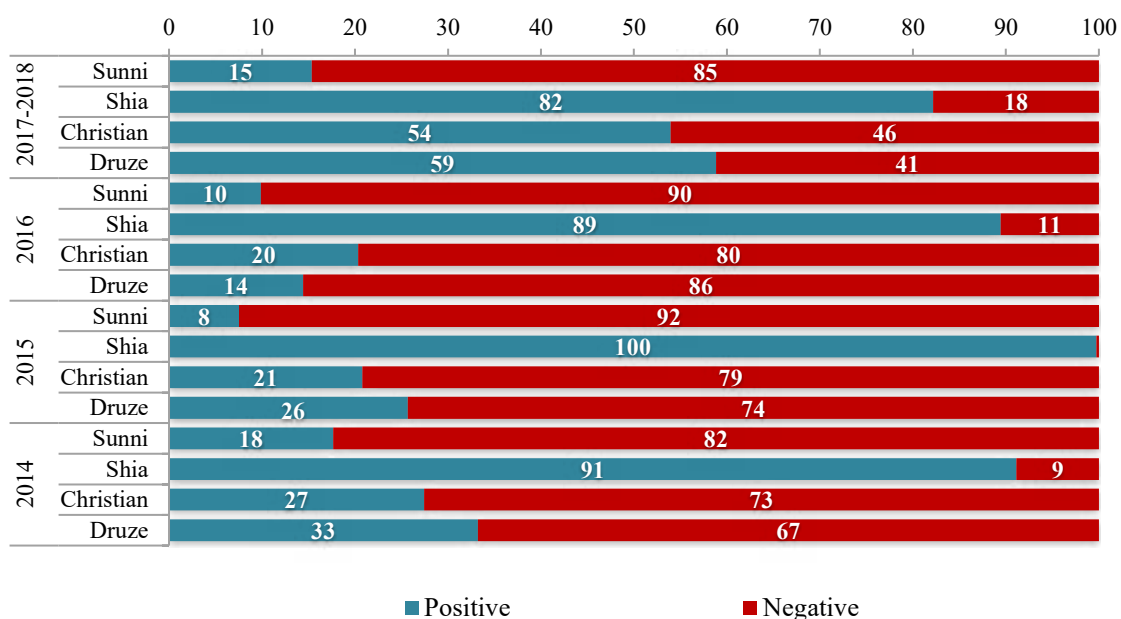
Figure 13. Lebanon: Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Arab Region



Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018), p. 310.

Among the Lebanese, however, major differences of opinion over Iran’s regional policies emerge when respondents are categorized by sectarian affiliation (fig. 14). On average, between 2014 and 2017/2018, 91 percent of Lebanon’s Shia approved of Iran’s policies toward the Arab region, whereas only 33 percent of the Druze, 31 percent of Christians, and 13 percent of Sunnis shared the same view.

Figure 14. Lebanon: Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Arab Region

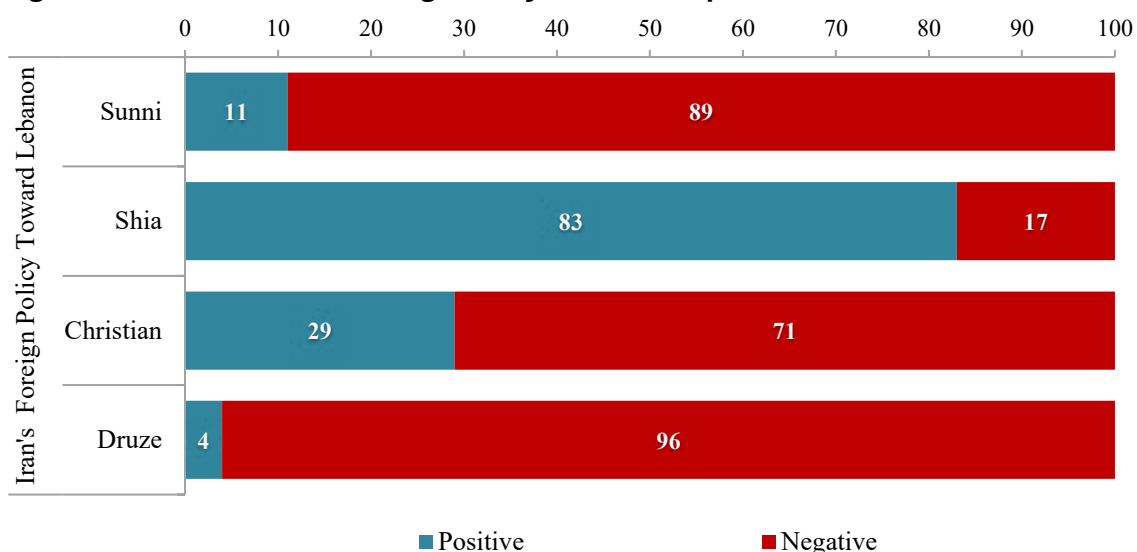


Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018).

Fairly similar views prevailed among the Lebanese when respondent from the country’s different confessions were asked about Iranian policies toward their own country (fig. 15). Except for the

Lebanese Shia, an overwhelming majority of whom held positive views toward Iran’s Lebanon policies, a significant majority of Christians and overwhelming numbers of Sunnis and Druze viewed Iran’s policy toward their country negatively. Respondents from Lebanon’s Druze community are particularly negative about Iranian policies in Lebanon, in view of reports that in recent years the Islamic Republic and the Hezbollah have sought to sow communal strife among the Druze in order to weaken their political powers and standing within the country.⁽¹⁰⁾

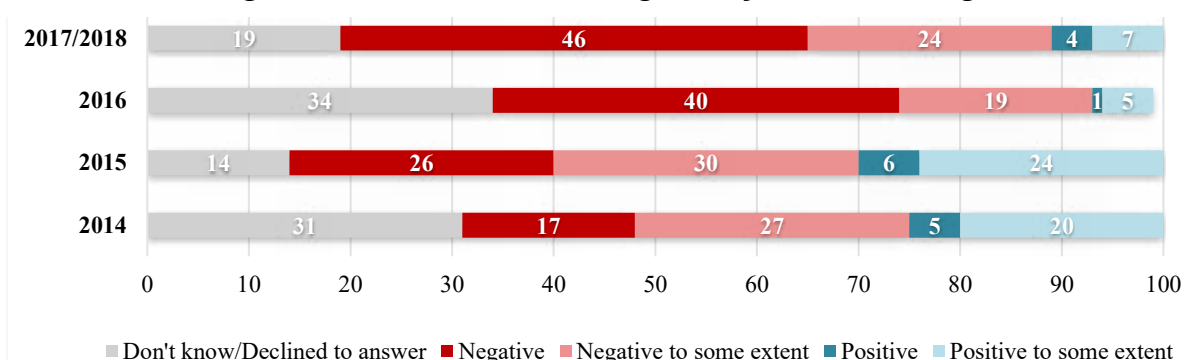
Figure 15. Lebanon: Iran’s Foreign Policy Toward Respondent’s Countries, 2019/2020



Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2020).

Despite an absence of geographic proximity, Iranian foreign policy is no more popular in the Maghreb. Fully 70 percent of Moroccans in 2017/2018 held negative or somewhat negative views toward Iran’s policies toward the Arab region (fig. 16). The percentages for Algeria (for 2016) were similar, as indicated in figure 17, and slightly more positive in Tunisia and Mauritania, as seen in figures 18 and 19, respectively.

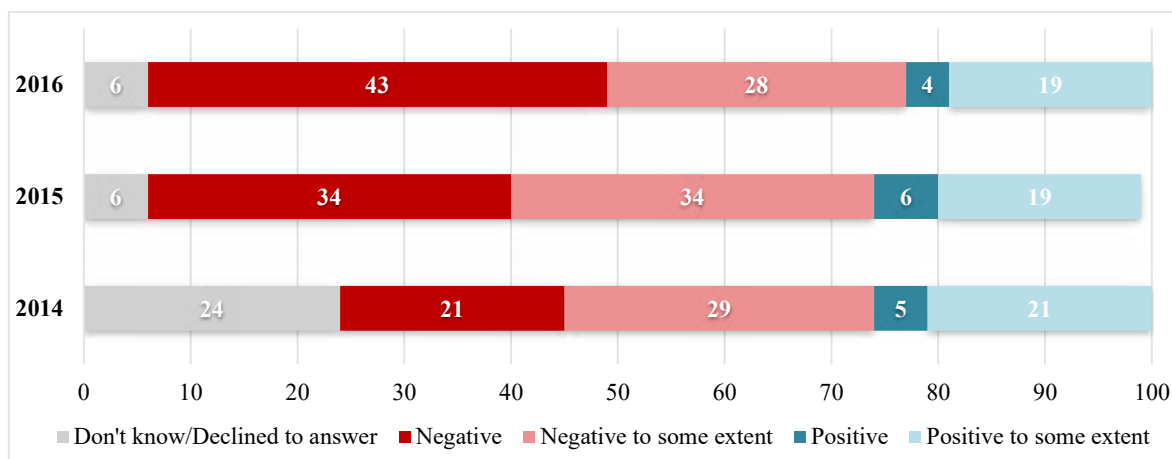
Figure 16. Morocco: Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Arab Region



Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018), p. 310

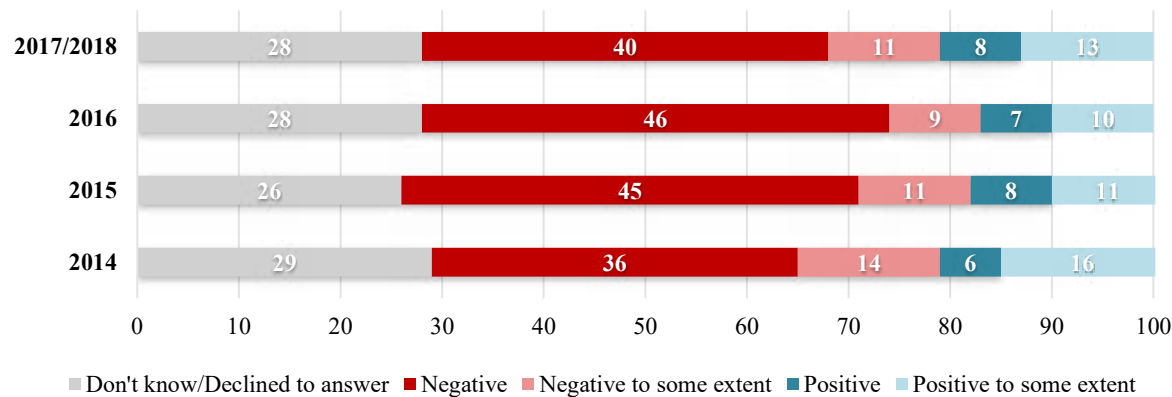
10 ETANA, “Divide and Conquer: The Growing Hezbollah Threat to the Druze,” Policy Paper 2019-20, Washington, DC: Middle East Institute, (October 2019), p. 6.

Figure 17. Algeria: Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Arab Region



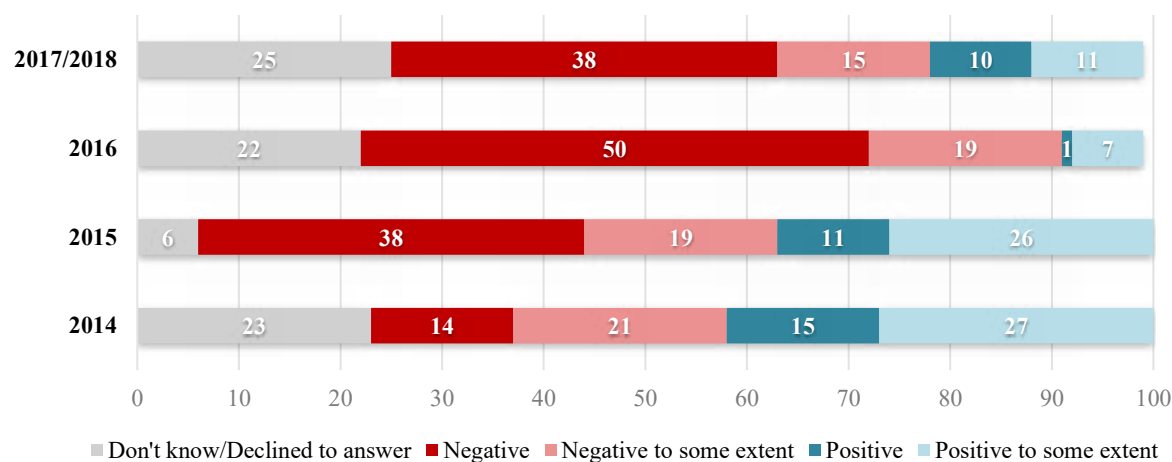
Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018), p. 310.

Figure 18. Tunisia: Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Arab Region



Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018), p. 310.

Figure 19. Mauritania: Iran’s Foreign Policy in the Arab Region



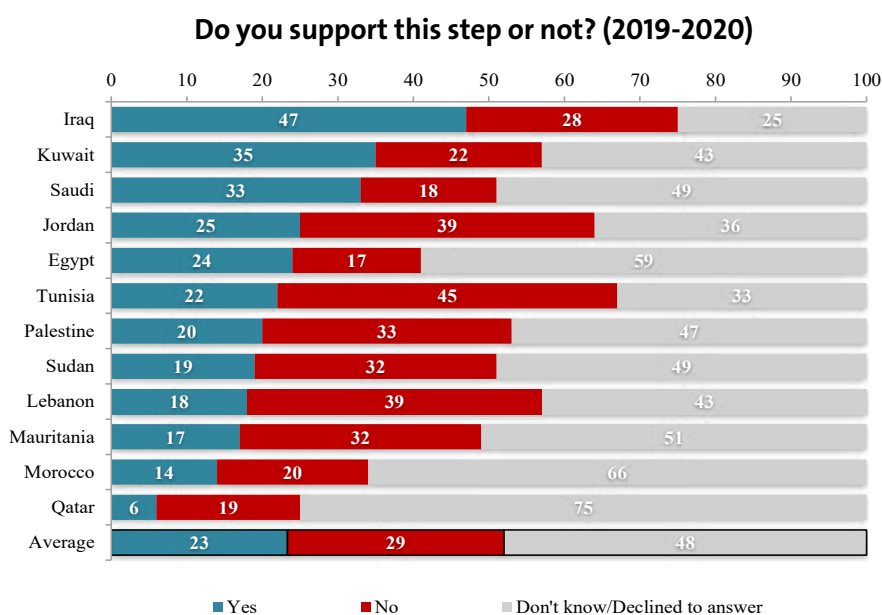
Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018), p. 310.



Iran's Nuclear Program

One of the main reasons for the pervasiveness of negative views in the Arab world toward Iran is the Islamic Republic's pursuit of its nuclear program despite significant international opposition, especially from the United States. In 2015, when the United States, Russia, and China joined the European Union in signing a comprehensive nuclear accord with Iran, many in the Arab world looked on with apprehension as the Islamic Republic began slowly reintegrating into the global economy. In 2018, with a new president in the White House, the United States withdrew from the accord and reimposed far reaching sanctions on Iran. As figure 20 demonstrates, in countries neighboring Iran, namely Iraq, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, the percentage of respondents supporting the US withdrawal from the agreement significantly outnumbered those opposing it. Qatar is once again the exception, with only 6 percent of respondents supporting the US withdrawal from the deal and 19 percent opposing it.

Figure 20. In 2018, the United States withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal.



Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2020), p. 24.

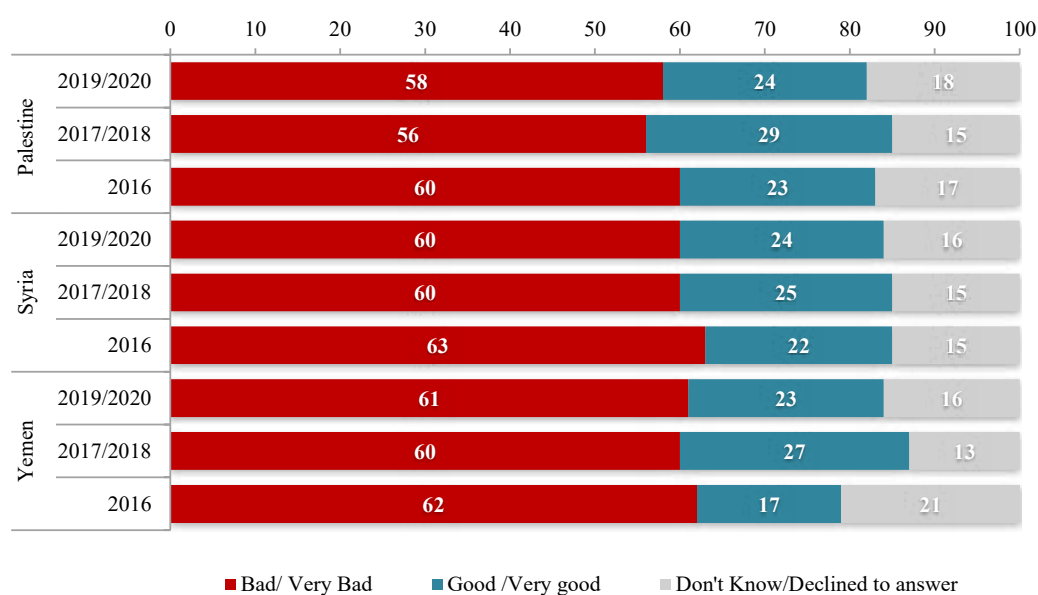
An important aspect of Arab views toward the Iranian nuclear program is the high percentage of respondents who either declined to answer or did not know how they feel about the US withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal. On average, 48 percent of everyone surveyed fell into this category, ranging as high as 75 percent in Qatar to 25 percent in Iraq. This high percentage appears to be a product of two primary factors. First, the answer appears to reflect admission of insufficient knowledge about the technical details of the deal and the complexity of the issues involved. Second, it reflects ambivalence towards the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal. If Israel has nuclear weapons, why should others in the region not have access to similar technology? However, should it be Iran that has access to the technology? The resulting ambivalence is reflected in responses in figure 20.



Iran's Policy Toward Palestine, Syria, and Yemen

An equally – if not more – problematic aspect of Iranian foreign policy in the perspective of Arab public opinion, is Iran's foreign policy pursuits relating to Palestine, Syria, and Yemen. As figure 21 demonstrates, from 2016 through to 2020, the percentage of Arabs seeing Iranian policies in these three countries as “bad” or “very bad” has far outweighed, often by three times, those who see them as “good” or “very good”.

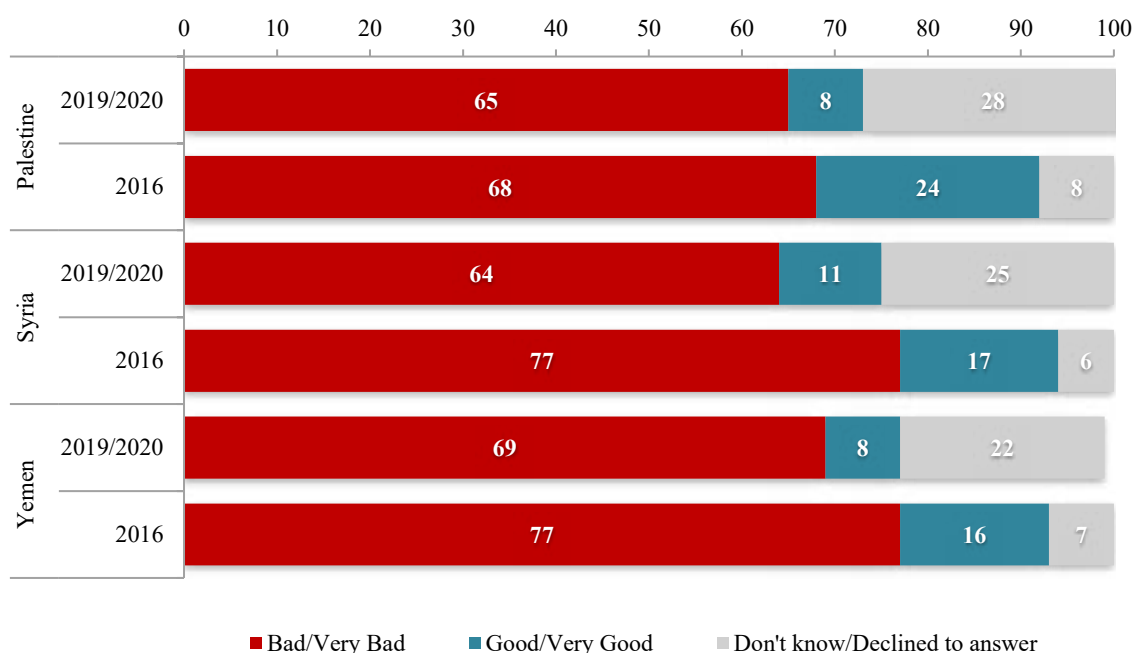
Figure 21. Iran's Foreign Policy Toward



Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2020), p. 15.

Iranian policies toward Palestine, Syria, and Yemen are seen as bad or very bad in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Egypt (figs. 22, 23, and 24). In Saudi Arabia (fig. 22), it appears that negative assumptions about Iranian foreign policy declined slightly from 2016 to 2019/2020, from an average of 74 percent to 66 percent respectively. But positive views toward Iranian foreign policy did not necessarily see an inverse increase during the same time period; in fact, they went from an average of 19 percent in 2016 to 9 percent in 2019/2020. This is due to the fact that more than three times as many Saudi respondents “did not know” or “declined to answer” in 2019/2020 as compared to 2016 (25 percent as compared to 7 percent).

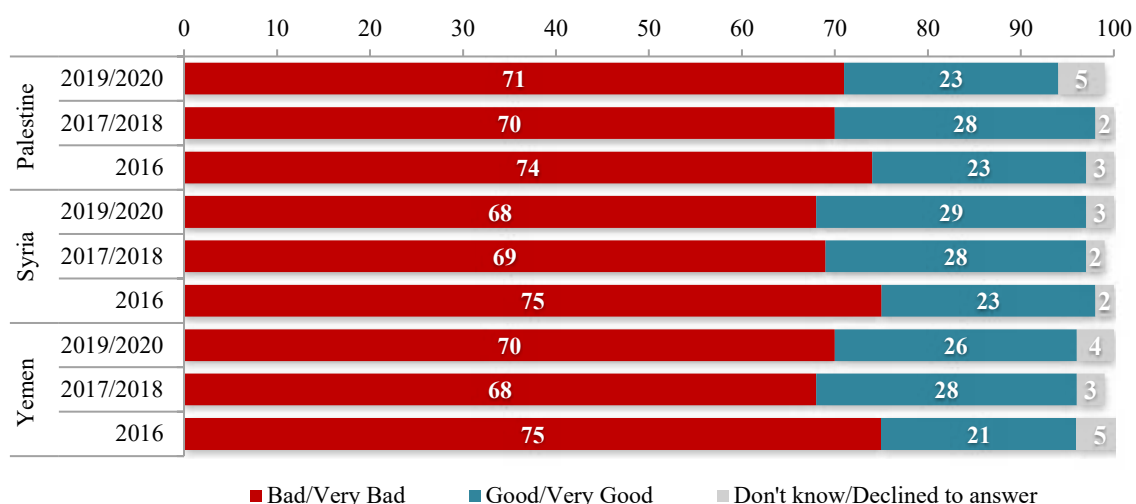
Figure 22. Saudi Arabia: Iran's Foreign Policy Toward



Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2020).

In Kuwait, views toward Iranian policy in Palestine, Syria, and Yemen have remained relatively consistent from 2016 to 2020. As evident in figure 23, from 2016 to 2020, on average 71 percent of Kuwaiti respondents saw Iranian policy in the three areas as bad or very bad, 25 percent as good or very good, and 3 percent did not know or declined to answer.

Figure 23. Kuwait: Iran's Foreign Policy Toward

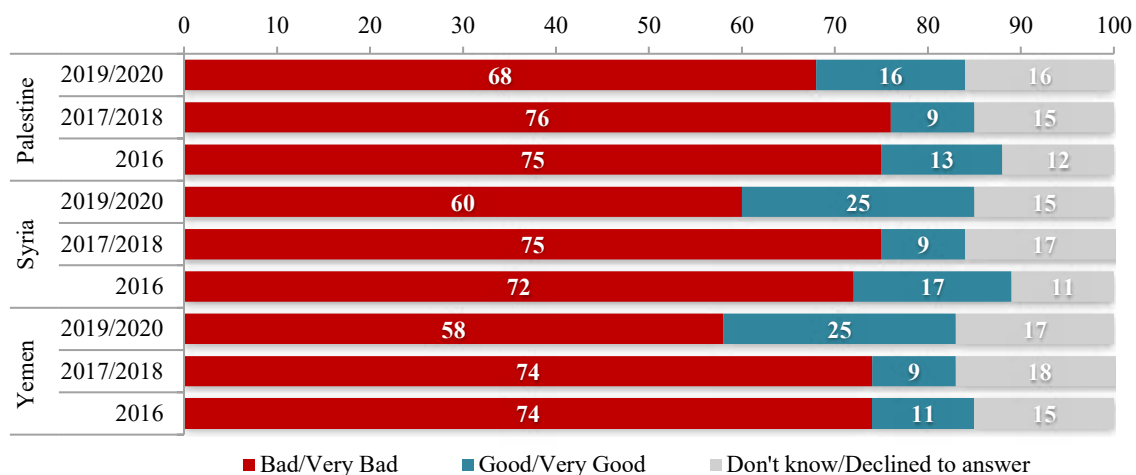


Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2020).

In Egypt, however, there appears to be a slight increase in positive perceptions about Iranian policy in 2019/2020 (fig. 24). Whereas in 2016 and 2017/2018 on average 11 percent of Egyptians viewed

Iranian policy toward Palestine, Syria, and Yemen positively, the average in 2019/2020 had doubled to 22 percent.

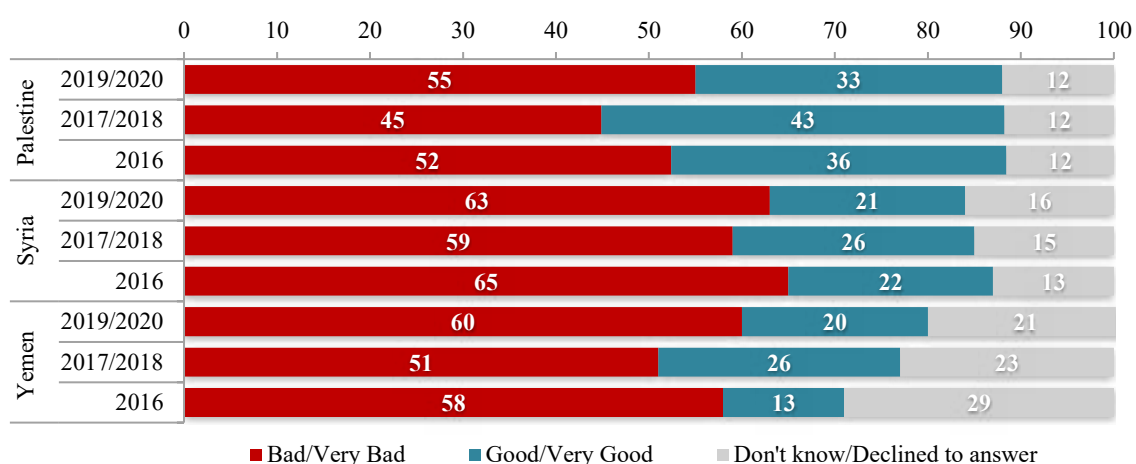
Figure 24. Egypt: Iran’s Foreign Policy Toward



Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2020).

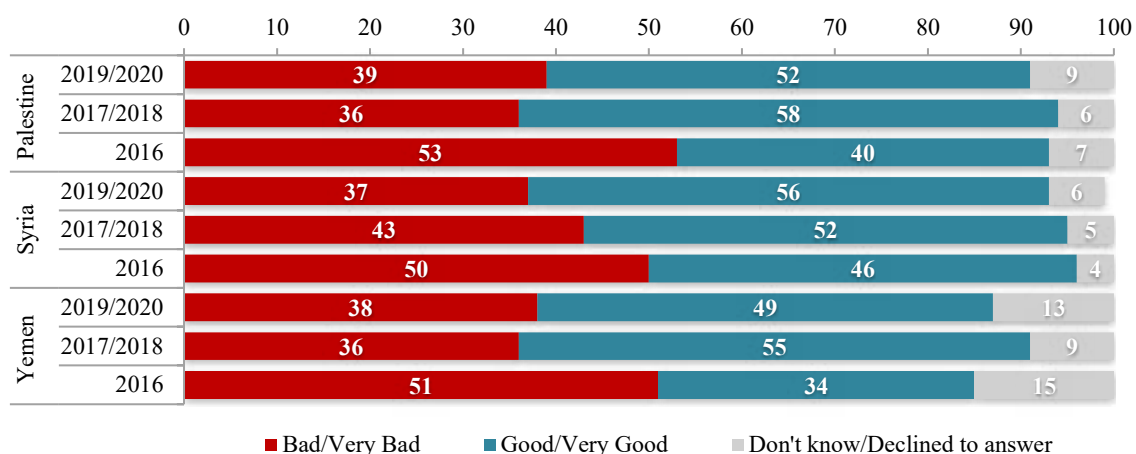
In Palestine, meanwhile in 2020 exactly three times as many people considered Iranian policies in Syria and Yemen as bad or very bad as compared to those who saw them as good or very good. While Palestinian views of Iranian policies toward Palestine are not as overwhelmingly negative, consistently fewer Palestinians perceive of Iran’s Palestine policies positively than the other way around (fig. 25). In Lebanon, by contrast, assumptions about Iranian policies in Palestine, Syria, and Yemen tend to be more evenly divided, reflecting the country’s sectarian mosaic (fig. 26).

Figure 25. Palestine: Iran’s Foreign Policy Toward



Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2020).

Figure 26. Lebanon: Iran’s Foreign Policy Toward

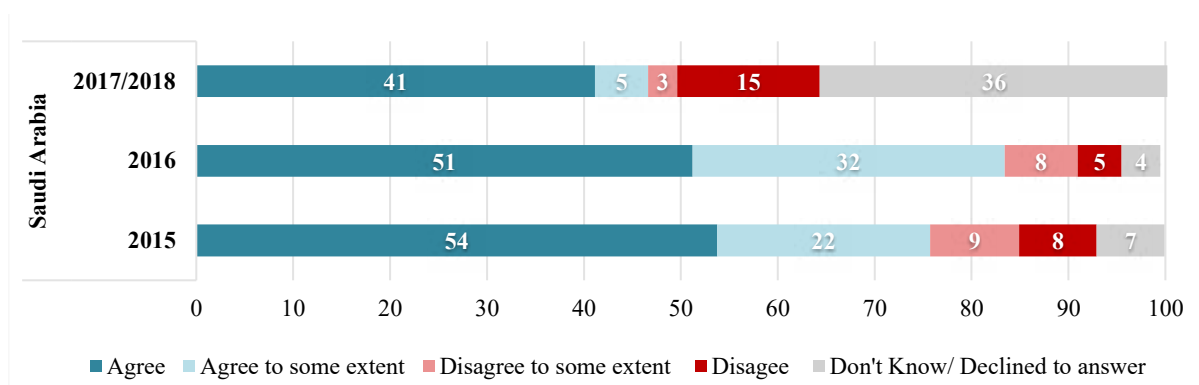


Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2019-2020 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2020).

Sectarianism

Much of Iran’s involvement in Syria and Yemen is commonly perceived in the Arab world to be motivated by sectarian objectives. Across the Arab world, in fact, there are widespread perceptions that Iran fuels sectarian and ethnic separatist tendencies in the Arab countries. Again, these perceptions tend to be most prevalent in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Egypt (figs. 27-29). In Iraq and Lebanon, countries with their own significant sectarian divides, as well as in Palestine, the percentages are somewhat more moderate (figs. 30-32), as is also the case in much of the Maghreb with the possible exception of Morocco (figs. 33-36).

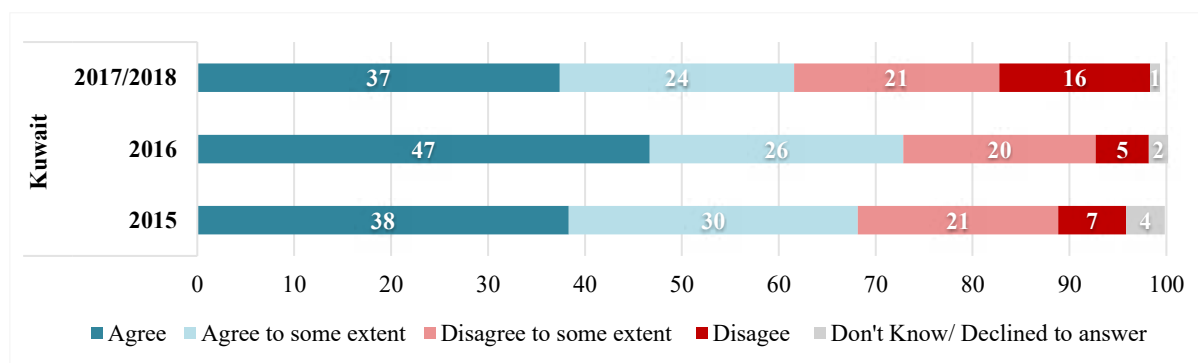
**Figure 27. Do you agree/oppose the following statement:
Iran fuels sectarian and ethnic separatist tendencies in the Arab countries?**



Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018).

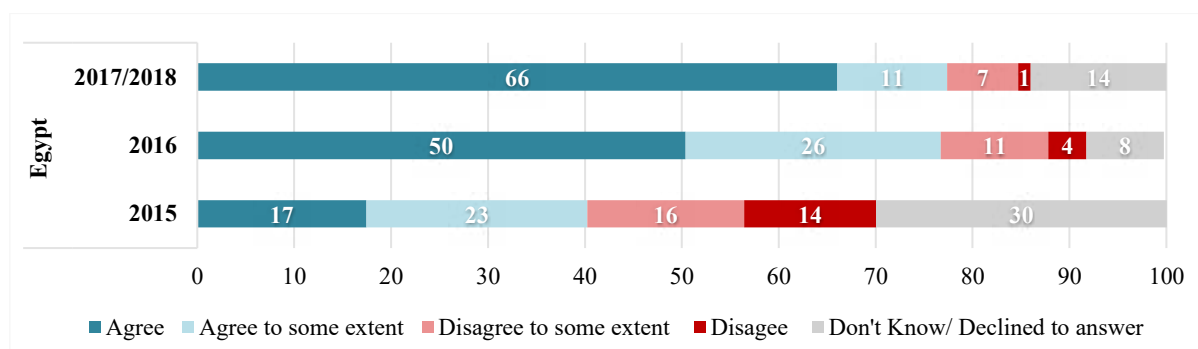


**Figure 28. Do you agree/oppose the following statement:
Iran fuels sectarian and ethnic separatist tendencies in the Arab countries?**



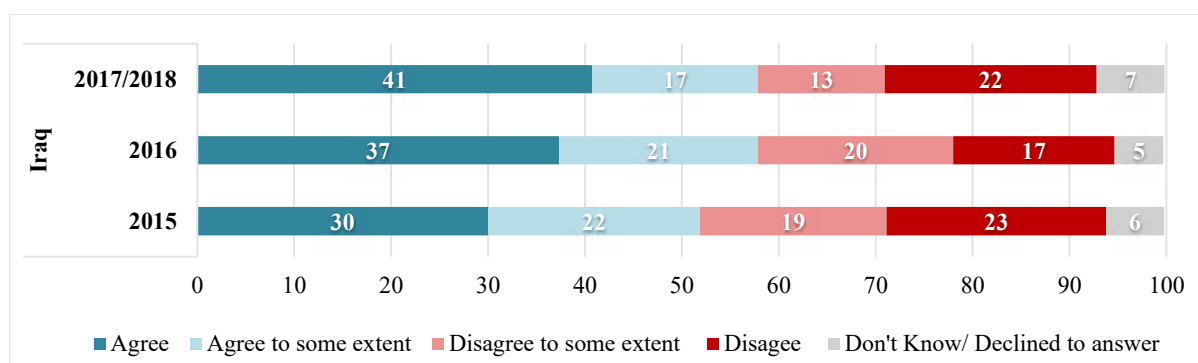
Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018).

**Figure 29. Do you agree/oppose the following statement:
Iran fuels sectarian and ethnic separatist tendencies in the Arab countries?**



Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018).

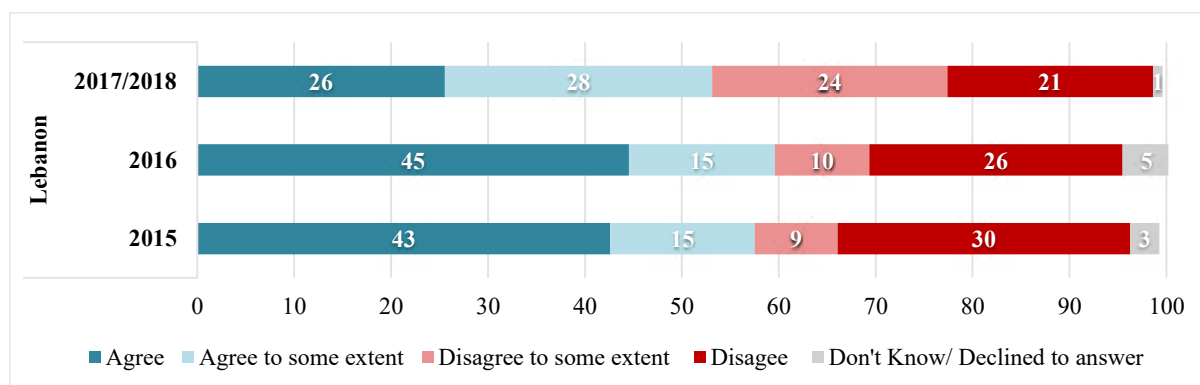
**Figure 30. Do you agree/oppose the following statement:
Iran fuels sectarian and ethnic separatist tendencies in the Arab countries?**



Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018).

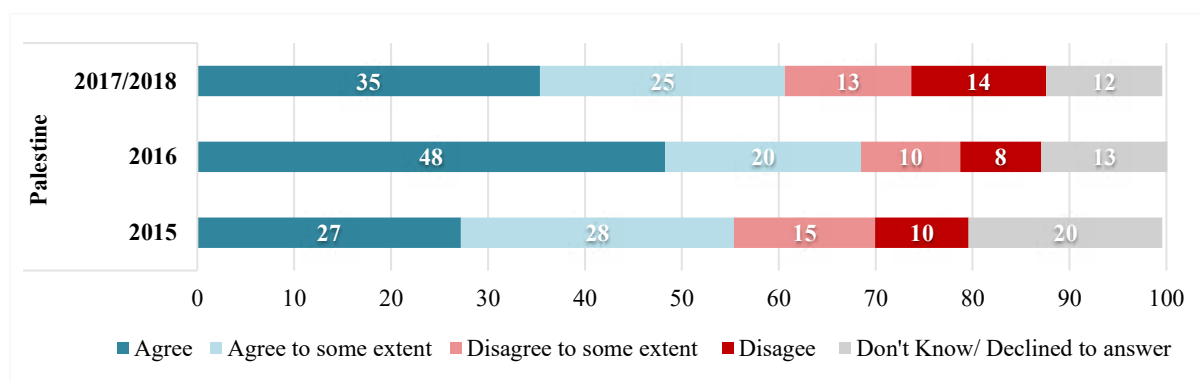


**Figure 31. Do you agree/oppose the following statement:
Iran fuels sectarian and ethnic separatist tendencies in the Arab countries?**



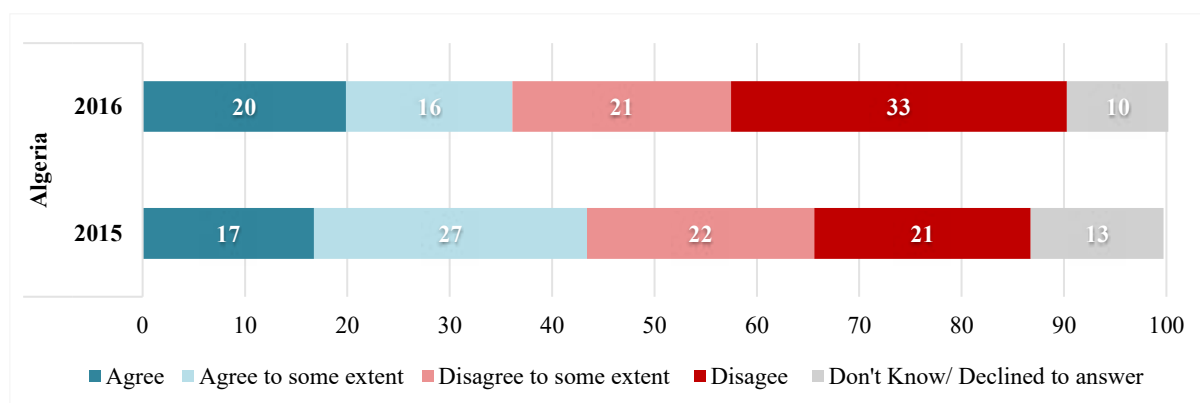
Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018).

**Figure 32. Do you agree/oppose the following statement:
Iran fuels sectarian and ethnic separatist tendencies in the Arab countries?**



Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018).

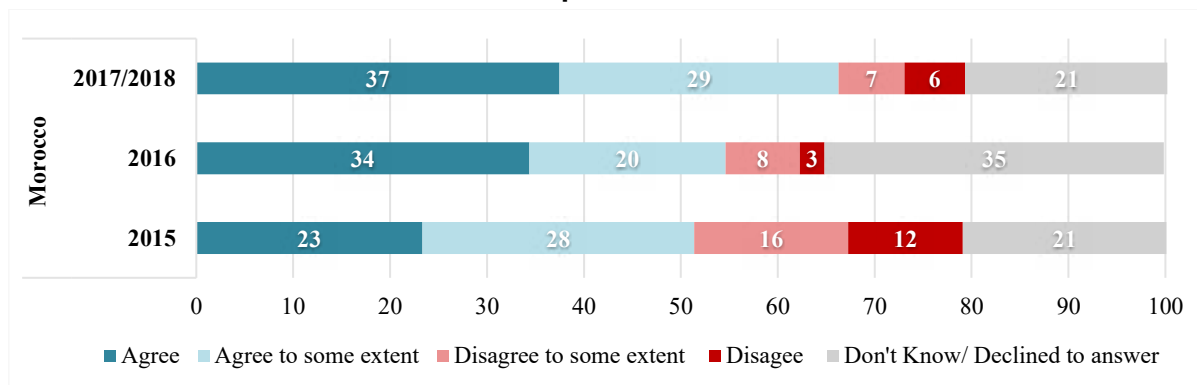
**Figure 33. Do you agree/oppose the following statement:
Iran fuels sectarian and ethnic separatist tendencies in the Arab countries?**



Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018).

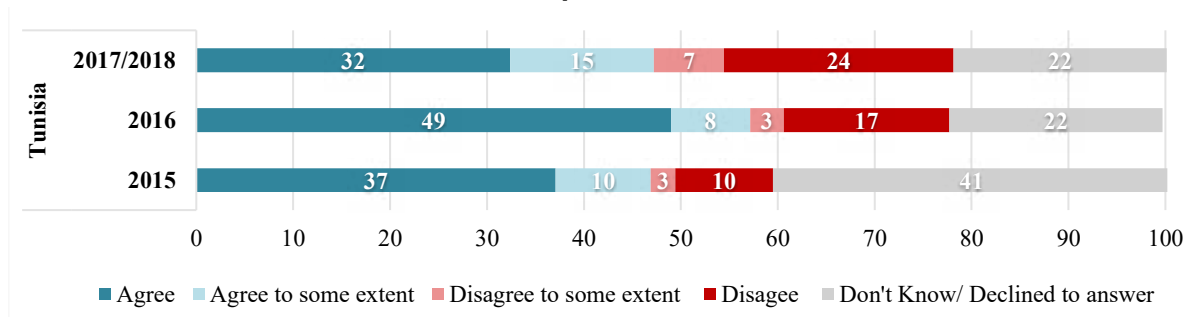


**Figure 34. Do you agree/oppose the following statement:
Iran fuels sectarian and ethnic separatist tendencies in the Arab countries?**



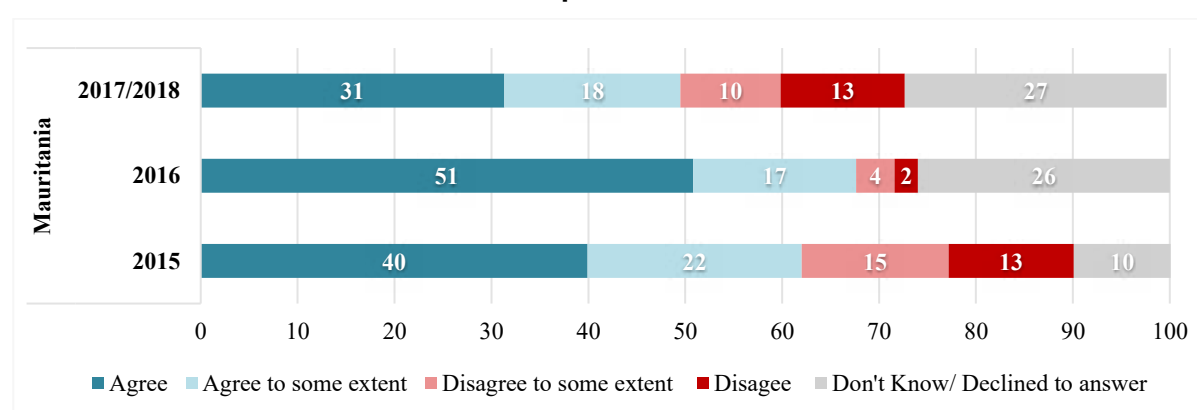
Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018).

**Figure 35. Do you agree/oppose the following statement:
Iran fuels sectarian and ethnic separatist tendencies in the Arab countries?**



Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018).

**Figure 36. Do you agree/oppose the following statement:
Iran fuels sectarian and ethnic separatist tendencies in the Arab countries?**



Source: Data compiled from Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, The 2017-2018 Arab Opinion Index, (Doha: ACRPS, 2018).



Conclusion

Tehran's policymakers have a serious image problem on their hands when it comes to the Arab world. The Islamic Republic's policies are universally seen by Arabs not just as negative but indeed as major threats and as sources of instability and insecurity. In line with the general animus that characterizes Iran's broader strategic competition with Saudi Arabia, Saudi perceptions of Iranian policies tend to be most negative, followed closely by those of Kuwaitis, Iraqis, and Egyptians. Few people in the Arab world lament the American withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear accord that lifted some economic sanctions on Iran and reduced barriers to its reintegration into the global economy. Moreover, considered to be motivated largely by sectarian concerns, Iranian policies in Syria, Yemen, and Palestine are seen in highly negative lights in almost all Arab countries. In recent years, the Iranian foreign ministry has made a concerted effort to try and reduce tensions between Iran and its Arab neighbors. As the data presented here indicates, so far such efforts have not had much of an impact. Whether the trend of the last few years toward increasingly negative perceptions of Iran can be changed remains to be seen.