

Hamideh Dorzadeh\*

## Arab Public Perception of Iran's Regional Role and Policies

### الرأي العام العربي تجاه دور إيران وسياساتها الإقليمية

**Abstract:** While Iran has expressed interest in pursuing neighbourly relations over the years, negative perceptions of Iran persist in Arab countries. A majority of Arab citizens view Iran's policies as a source of threat to their respective countries and to the security and stability of the region. Iran has consistently been considered the third most threatening country to most respondents' countries since 2011. Conversely, the most unfavourable views toward Iran were reported in Iraq, among both the Sunni and Shia respondents. However, the sectarian divide in opinion toward Iran is more evident in Lebanon, where its Shia population maintains favourable views toward the Islamic Republic. This paper examines Arab opinion toward Iran based on data from the 2022 Arab Opinion index, a regular survey implemented by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies in 14 Arab countries.

**Keywords:** Iran; Arab Opinion Index; Arab Countries.

**المخلص:** عبّرت إيران عن رغبتها في إقامة علاقات مع دول الجوار على مرّ السنوات، إلا أنّ التصوّرات السلبية عن إيران لا تزال مستمرة في الدول العربية، فغالبية المواطنين العرب ينظرون إلى سياسات إيران على أنّها مصدر تهديد لدولهم ولأمن المنطقة واستقرارها. لقد عبّدت إيران ثالث أكثر الدول تهديدًا بالنسبة إلى معظم الدول التي شملها الاستطلاع منذ عام 2011، وشكّلت الأصوات العراقية النسبة الأكبر من الآراء السلبية تجاه إيران بين المستجيبين السنة والشيعة، في حين أنّ الانقسام الطائفي في الرأي في لبنان تجاه إيران كان الأشد وضوحًا، فأراء الشيعة إيجابية تجاه الجمهورية الإسلامية. تستعرض هذه الورقة الرأي العام العربي تجاه إيران استنادًا إلى بيانات استطلاع المؤشر العربي لعام 2022، وهو مسح ينفذه المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات في 14 دولة عربية على نحو منتظم.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** إيران؛ استطلاع المؤشر العربي؛ الدول العربية.

\* Researcher and Coordinator of the Iranian Studies Unit, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.

Email: [hamideh.dorzadeh@dohainstitute.org](mailto:hamideh.dorzadeh@dohainstitute.org)

## Introduction

The majority of Arabs consider Iranian policies a major source of insecurity and instability in the region. Data from the 2022 Arab Opinion Index (AOI), published by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS), and based on interviews with respondents from fourteen Arab countries (Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and Tunisia) show that Iran has consistently topped the list of external powers posing a threat to Arab countries. Negative Arab attitudes toward Iran were exacerbated following the 2011 Arab Spring, with Iran's involvement in Syria and Yemen. Since coming to Office in 2021, President Ebrahim Raisi has called for a revival of regionalism and good neighbourliness, in particular with Iran's Arab neighbours.<sup>1</sup> In addition to Tehran's interest in good regional relations and the proposal of regional security initiatives such as the Hormuz Peace Endeavor (2019), it has put greater effort into repairing its ties with the West, in particular during the two administrations of Hassan Rouhani. However, the shift in Iran's foreign policy approach from Rouhani to Raisi reflects its policy's broader trajectory toward the East. Most importantly, the recent agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, announced in March 2023, to restore diplomatic relations is a testament to its move away from tensions to diplomacy for greater regional stability. Nevertheless, according to the 2022 Arab opinion poll, such efforts have not yet enhanced Iran's image in the Arab world.

## An Assessment of Arab Attitudes toward Iran and its Policies

Iran has consistently been considered the third most threatening country to most respondents' countries since 2011.<sup>2</sup> As Table 1 demonstrates, looking at threat perceptions over time, Israel has experienced a decline from 51 percent in 2011 to 38 percent in 2022. The perception of the US as the primary source of threat has varied since 2011, when it was 22 percent, peaking at 29 percent in 2019/2020, before falling back down to 21 percent in 2022. Arab public opinion of Iran as a threat has increased gradually, from 4 percent in 2011 to 7 percent in 2022. However, perception of Iran as the most threatening country is much lower than both Israel and the United States. In fact, the percentage of respondents who identified Iran as the most threatening country dropped by 5 percent in 2022 since its peak in 2019/2020.

**Table 1**  
**Longitudinal Comparison of Arabs' Most Threatening Countries (2011-2022)**

Country respondent	2022	2019/ 2020	2017/ 2018	2016	2015	2014	2012/ 2013	2011
Israel	38	37	39	41	45	42	52	51
United States	21	29	28	27	22	24	21	22
Iran	7	12	10	10	10	9	6	4
Arab Countries	5	5	7	5	5	5	3	2
Russia	3	1	2	3	1	--	--	--
European Countries	2	1	1	1	1	2	1	--
Other countries	2	1	1	1	1	1	0.3	1
Other	1	1	0	1	1	0.1	--	0.2
No Threats/ Refuse to Answer	22	13	12	10	13	18	16	19.4

1 For an assessment of Raisi's policies, see: Mehran Kamrava & Hamideh Dorzadeh, "Back to the Future in Iran: Political and Policy Implications of the 2021 Presidential Elections," *The Muslim World*, vol. 113, no. 1-2 (2023).

2 For an analysis on how Arab attitude toward Iran has evolved over time see: Mehran Kamrava & Hamideh Dorzadeh, "Arab Opinion Toward Iran 2019/2020," *Studies*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 22/10/2020, accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/2WERha8>

**Table 2**  
**Arab Public Opinion on Most Threatening Countries (2022)**

Country respondent	Israel	United States	Iran	Arab Countries	France	Turkey	Russia	Ethiopia	Other Countries	No Threats/ Refuse to Answer
Palestine	79	12	1	3	0	0	1	0	0	4
Lebanon	53	14	19	5	0	0	1	0	0	8
Algeria	44	4	0	0	42	0	0	0	0	5
Jordan	44	18	9	3	0	0	1	0	0	23
Egypt	32	9	4	11	1	9	5	20	1	7
Sudan	27	22	3	19	0	0	2	11	1	15
Mauritania	25	10	0	6	6	0	1	0	1	44
Kuwait	24	25	22	1	0	2	6	0	1	18
Tunisia	9	10	0	13	15	2	1	0	0	49
Iraq	7	24	44	3	0	15	1	0	0	5
Libya	7	22	0	14	4	20	3	0	0	24
Morocco	6	2	3	22	1	1	2	0	6	48
Saudi Arabia	3	3	20	0	0	0	0	0	0	72
Qatar	25	2	1	4	0	0	0	0	0	38
<b>Average</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>25</b>

However, the 2022 country-specific breakdown of threat perception (Table 2) shows that most of the negative attitudes toward Iran stem from Iraq and Saudi Arabia. In Iraq, 44 percent of respondents reported that Iran is the most threatening country, in comparison to only 24 percent for the United States and 7 percent for Israel. The percentage of Saudi respondents seeing Iran as a threat is approximately 7 times more (20 percent) than those who view Israel and the United States as a threat to Saudi Arabia (3 percent for both). An overwhelming number of Saudi respondents refused to assess Islamic Republic's policies toward Yemen.

The majority of Saudis, 72 percent, declined to answer or identified no threats to their country. The growing crackdown on freedom of expression and oppression against those who speak out in Saudi Arabia following the appointment of Mohammed bin Salman as crown prince could explain these figures.<sup>3</sup>

Other countries with the highest perception of an Iranian threat are Kuwait (22 percent) and Lebanon (19 percent). Iran's policies and involvement in the Arab Mashreq and the Gulf, as well as sectarian tendencies, are two important factors that could explain negative trends in threat perceptions over the years (Table 1). Significantly, when comparing these numbers with those of the Arab Maghreb, where Iran does not have a significant influence, the majority of respondents have reported low numbers for Iran as a source of threat to their countries: 3 percent in Morocco, and 0 percent in Algeria, Mauritania, Tunisia, and Libya. Respondents from Egypt (4 percent) and Sudan (3 percent) followed suit. In addition to Israel and the United States, an overwhelming number of respondents in the Maghreb saw Arab

3 "Saudi Arabia 2022," *Amnesty International*, accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/43V3FU4>

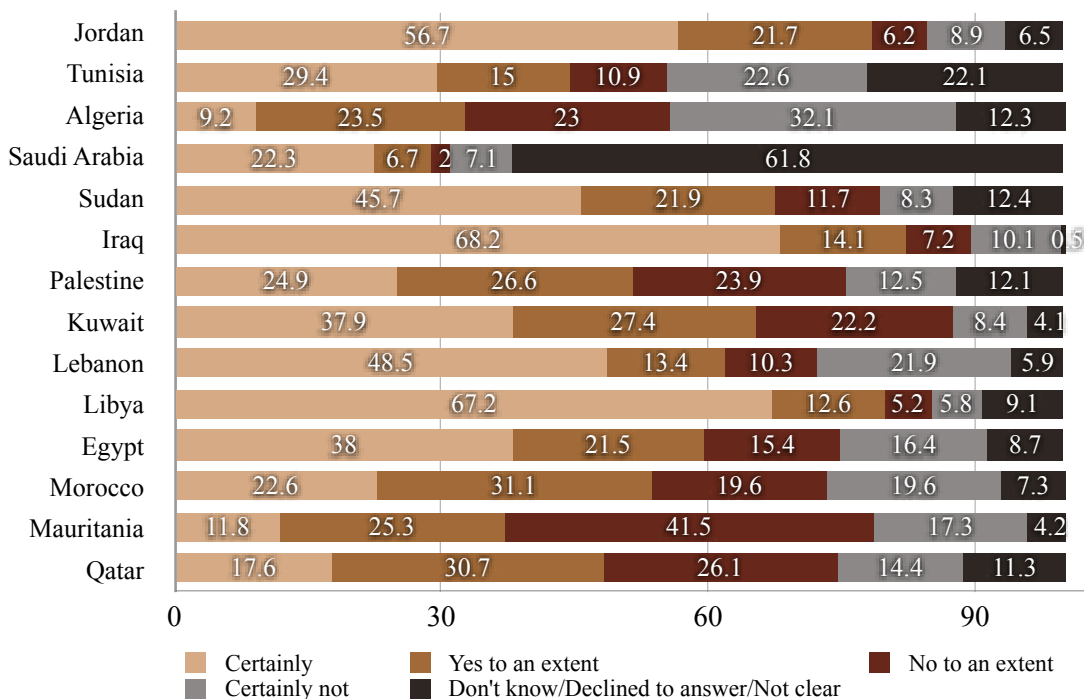
countries, France, Turkey, and Ethiopia as threatening their countries, while others declined to answer or recognized no threats.

Arab respondents not only see Iran as a threat, but they also consider its policies to be undermining regional security and stability. As shown in Figure 1, in 2022, Iraqis overwhelmingly (82 percent) perceived Iranian foreign policy as a threat to the region, with only 17 percent considering its policies in a positive light. The negative perception of Iran's foreign policy could be a result of Tehran's extensive influence over Iraq's military, security, economy, and society. Looking at Iraqi respondents' views through sectarian lines, it is evident that both Sunnis and Shias view Iran's policies negatively, 90 and 75 percent respectively. In comparison to only 10 percent Sunni respondents, 25 percent of Shia Iraqis view Iranian policies positively, claiming that they do not pose a threat to the region's security.

Exploring Iraqi views over time, it is evident that Shia perceptions of Iran's policies changed negatively since 2020, coinciding with the assassination of the Quds Force commander, Qasem Soleimani, in January 2020. The rise in negative perceptions of Iranian policies from 37 percent in 2016 to 76 percent in 2022 may be a result of the continued inter-Shia rivalries and power struggle in the aftermath of Soleimani's assassination, as well as increased discontent over the role of Iran and its allies in Iraq (see Figure 2).<sup>4</sup> Public anger and a change in Shia sentiments toward Iran were also evident in the targeting of the Iranian consulates in Najaf and Karbala during the November 2019 protests.<sup>5</sup> In almost the majority of other Arab countries, as Figure 1 illustrates, more than half of the respondents perceived Iranian policies as threatening to the security and stability of the region: Libya (80 percent), Jordan (78 percent), Sudan (68 percent), Kuwait (65 percent), Lebanon (61 percent), Egypt (60 percent), Morocco (53 percent), and Palestine (51 percent).

Figure 1

Do Iranian policies pose a threat to the security and stability of the region? (2022)

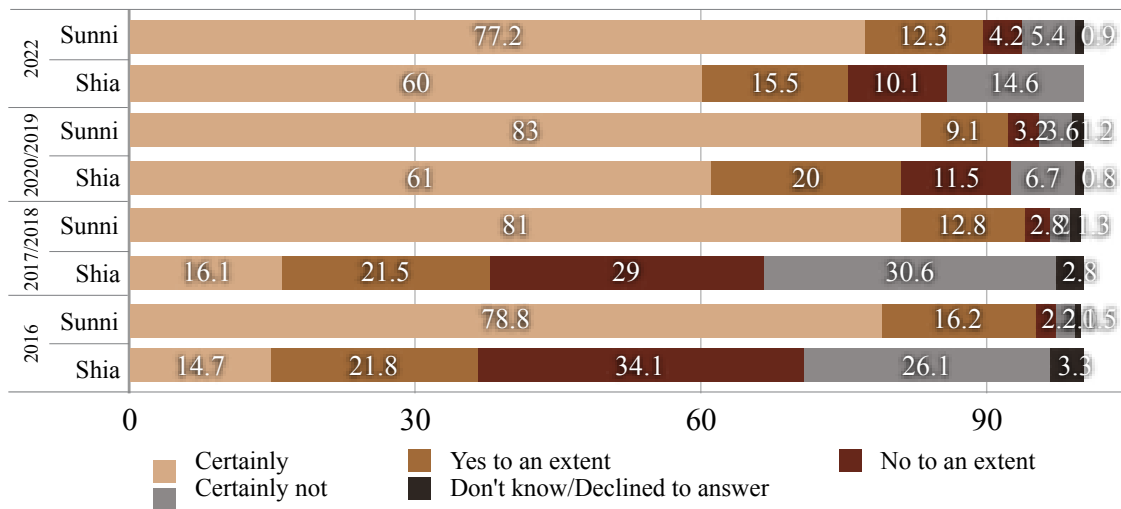


4 Ranj Alaaldin, "What will happen to Iraqi Shiite militias after one key leader's death?," *Brookings*, 3/3/2020, accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/43Vxxj4>

5 "Iraq unrest: Protesters set fire to Iranian consulate in Najaf," *BBC*, 28/11/2019, accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3NEL21E>

Figure 2

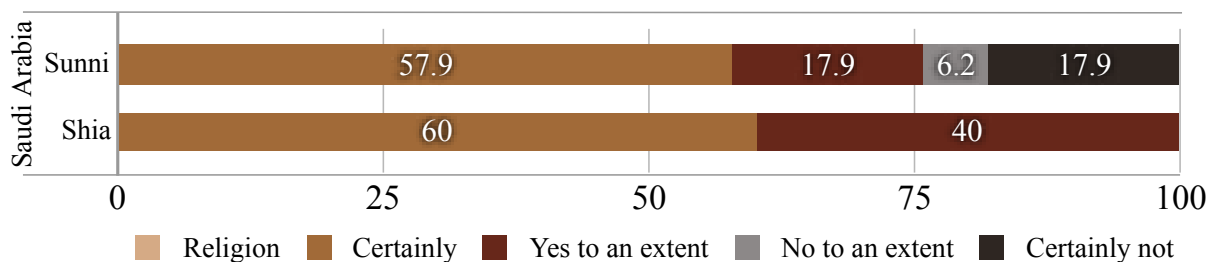
Iraq: Do Iranian policies pose a threat to the security and stability of the region? (2016-2022)



A striking finding from the 2022 AOI is that Saudi respondents, among other Arab respondents, reported the lowest percentage of negative perceptions toward Iranian policies, with only 29 percent of respondents having unfavourable views of Iran's policies. Considerably, 62 percent of Saudis declined to answer, comprising the highest percentage of refusal in comparison with other Arab countries. Iran's policies are unpopular among both Sunni and Shia Saudi respondents when their views are broken down in sectarian terms. All Saudi Shias negatively assess Iranian policies, sharing similar views with 76 percent of Sunnis. This is because Saudi Shias have distanced themselves from Iran given that they are constantly accused of being its agents, and instead follow other clerics such as Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, 24 percent of Saudi Sunni respondents have favourable views of Islamic Republic's policies, as in Figure 3. In Kuwait, while the majority of respondents, Sunnis (74 percent) and Shias (54 percent), thought of Iran's policies as having a negative impact on the security of the region, 26 percent of Sunnis and 46 percent of Shias believed otherwise, as demonstrated in Figure 4. Qatari respondents' views were also split (Figure 5): 55 percent of Sunnis and 48 percent of Shias expressed unfavourable views, while 45 percent of Sunnis and 52 percent Shias had favourable views.

Figure 3

Saudi Arabia: Do Iranian policies pose a threat to the security and stability of the region? (2022)



6 Omaima Al Najjar, "The Saudi Shia: Between an Iranian rock and a Saudi hard place," *Al Jazeera*, 8/5//2019, accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/45WrDAh>

Figure 4

**Kuwait: Do Iranian policies pose a threat to the security and stability of the region? (2022)**

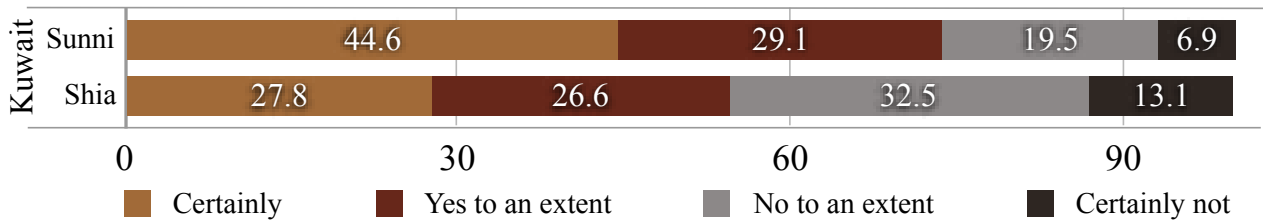
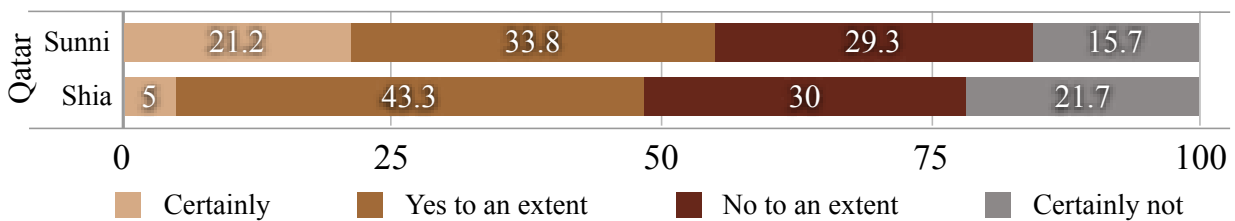


Figure 5

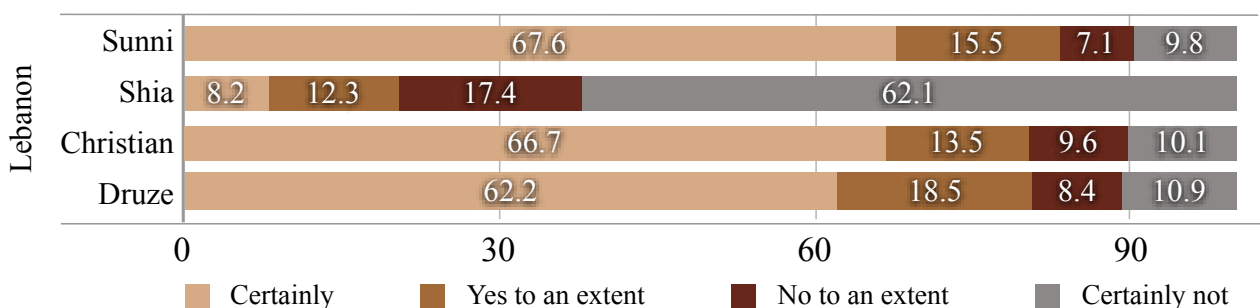
**Qatar: Do Iranian policies pose a threat to the security and stability of the region? (2022)**



In Lebanon, where Iran has a greater influence due to its close ties with Hezbollah, a divide in opinion toward Iranian policies among Sunni and Shia respondents is more pronounced. In fact, the highest percentage of Shia respondents with favourable views toward Iran was reported for Lebanon. Nearly 80 percent of the Shia respondents reported that Islamic Republic's foreign policy does not pose a threat to regional security, with 83 percent of Sunnis, 80 of percent Christians, and 81 percent of Druze expressing disapproval of Iranian policies (Figure 6). Iran's continued support for Hezbollah is perhaps a leading factor for resentment toward its policies by a significant majority of Lebanese Christians, Druze, and Sunnis.

Figure 6

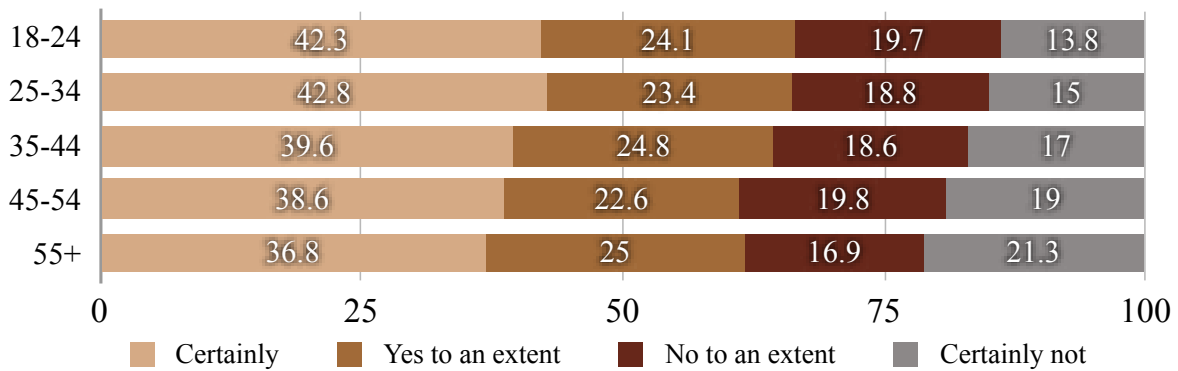
**Lebanon: Do Iranian policies pose a threat to the security and stability of the region? (2022)**



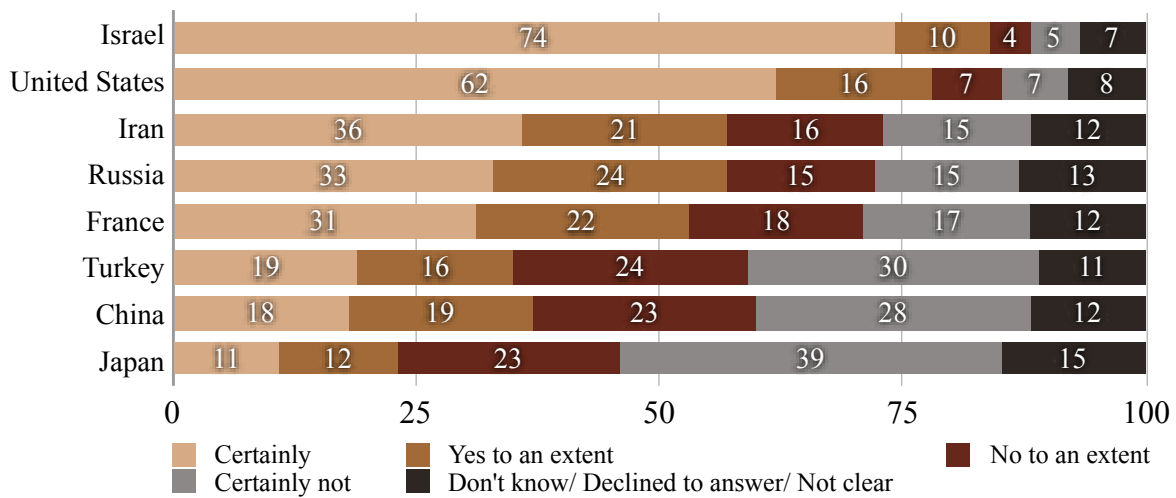
Examining Arab views on Iranian policies in the region across various ages shows that respondents held similar positive (ranging from 34 to 39 percent), and negative views (ranging from 61 to 67 percent) (Figure 7). Support for Iranian policies was the highest among those aged 45-54 (approximately 39 percent). Those aged 18 to 24 years maintained the highest percentage of unfavourable views on Iranian policies in the region (67 percent). Iran's unpopularity among Arab youth is not surprising when looking at the latest results

of the Arab Youth Survey (AYS), conducted with youths from 17 Arab countries. In 2021, nearly two-thirds of Arab youth (64 percent) aged 18-24 years, considered Iran to be an enemy of their country and only 33 percent of them saw the Islamic Republic as an ally.<sup>7</sup> At 88 percent, Israel was second on the list, with 11 percent of the youth considering it an ally. A significant number of Arab youths viewed other Arab countries such as Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia as allies. Based on the 2022 AYS, only 7 percent of youth believed that Iran has the most influence on the Arab world. While the percentage viewing Iran as an adversary was higher in 2019 (67 percent), 13 percent of respondents believed that Iran has increased its influence in the Arab world the most over the past five years.<sup>8</sup> Nearly 36 percent of respondents considered the US as the dominant player in the Arab world. Saudi Arabia was second on the list, standing at 11 percent. However, 73 percent of young Arabs strongly or to an extent support US's disengagement in the Middle East region.<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 7**  
**Attitudes Toward Iranian Policies Based on Age Group (2022)**



**Figure 8**  
**Do you think that the policies of some international and regional powers threaten the security and stability of the region? (2022)**



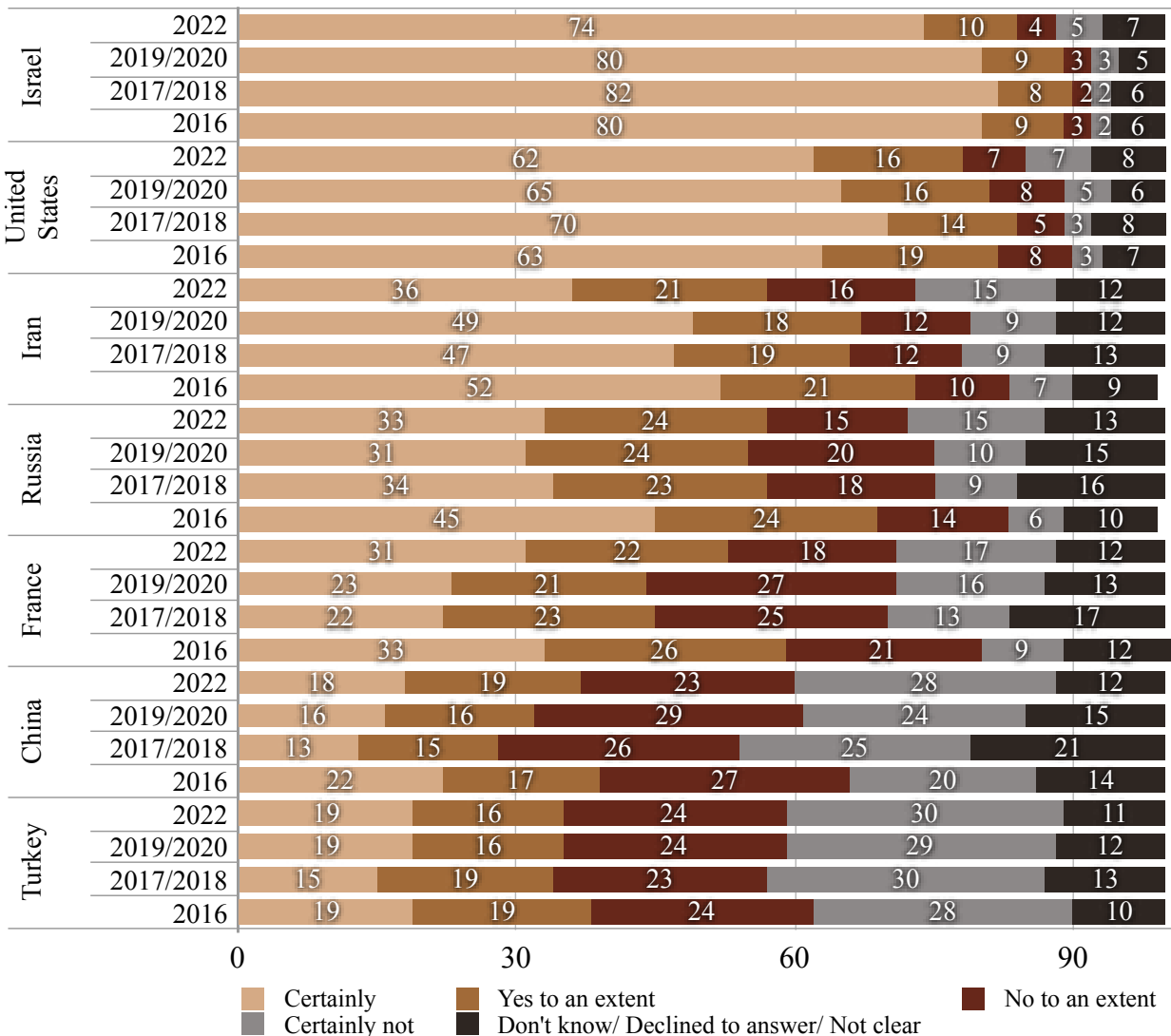
7 "Arab Youth Survey 2021 – Top 10 Findings," *Survey*, Arab Youth Survey, 13th Annual Edition, 2021, accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3MOt8b0>

8 Full findings of the 2019 AYS could be seen here: "A Call for Reform," *Survey*, Arab Youth Survey, 11th Annual ASDA'A BCW Arab Youth Survey, 2019, accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/45Is3tU>

9 The 2022 AYS survey was conducted with 3,400 young Arabs from 17 countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestinian, Syria, and Yemen. Access survey findings here: "Findings," *Arab Youth Survey*, accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3WSia8T>

Figure 9

Do you think that the policies of some international regional powers threaten the security and stability of the region? (2016-2022)



Significantly, percentage of respondents negatively viewing Iran's policies toward the region has declined from 73 percent in 2016 to 57 percent in 2022.

Figure 8 demonstrates Arab assessments of international and regional powers towards the region. Comparing Iran's policies with those of other countries shows that Israel is the most threatening country to the security and stability of the region according to 84 percent of respondents. United States was the second most threatening country, with 78 percent of respondents expressing unfavourable views. Other countries perceived to be threatening are Russia (57 percent), France (53 percent), China (37 percent), Turkey (35 percent), and Japan (23 percent). These views toward regional and international actors and their ranking in terms of threat perceptions have been consistent since 2016 (see Figure 9). Significantly, the percentage of respondents negatively viewing Iran's policies toward the region has declined from 73 percent in 2016 to 57 percent in 2022. This shows Arab that respondents' perception of Iranian policies improves when they are asked to evaluate them in comparison to those of the United States and Israel. As discussed below, when survey questions focus on Iran's policies alone, negative sentiments of the country are more pronounced.

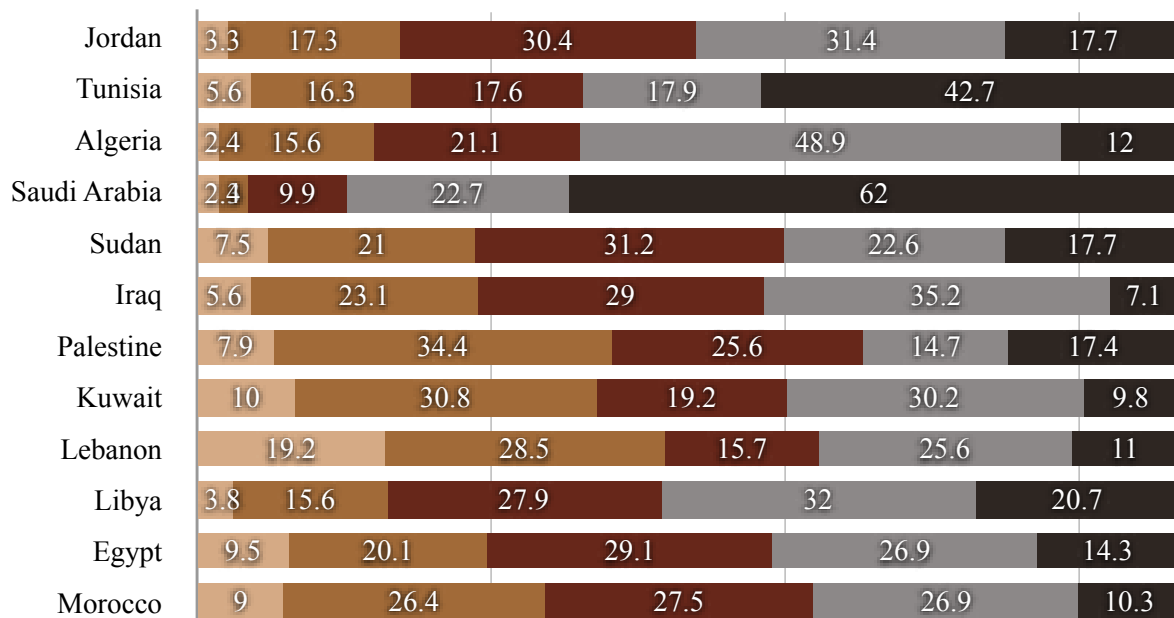


Given that 76 percent of all Arab respondents believe that the Palestinian cause concerns all Arabs, it is significant that the majority of the respondents, regardless of their countries' geographic proximity to Iran, perceived Iranian policies toward Palestine as "bad" or "very bad" (Figure 10). Negative sentiments on Iran's policies toward Palestine were the highest among Algerian respondents (70 percent). Other respondents from countries such as Iraq (64 percent), Jordan (62 percent), Libya (60 percent), and Morocco (54 percent), shared similar views. Significantly, negative attitude toward Iran's Palestine policies was the lowest among Saudi respondents (33 percent). This is because the majority of Saudis (62 percent) "did not know" or "declined to answer" due to self-censorship. Approximately 50 percent of Saudis also declined to offer their opinions on US policies toward Palestine.

Respondents in Mauritania (55 percent) and Lebanon (48 percent), saw Iranian policies on Palestine as "good" or "very good". In Palestine, the percentage of respondents rating Iran's policies toward their country as "good" or "very good" was 42 percent, only 2 percent higher than those considering them "bad" or "very bad". While Palestinian attitude toward Iran has been negative over the years, this recent improvement could be a result of Iran's close affiliation with Hamas and increased Israeli aggression.<sup>10</sup> Arab perceptions of Iran's foreign policy toward Palestine since 2016 show that the percentage of respondents rating the Islamic Republic's policies as "good" or "very good" has increased from 24 percent in 2016 to 31 percent in 2022 (Figure 11). Those who considered Iran's policies as "bad" or "very bad" declined from 61 percent in 2016 to 52 percent in 2022.

Figure 10

Country-Specific of Public Opinion on Iran's Policies toward Palestine (2016-2022)



Iran's policies in Yemen are viewed negatively in light of the country's increased, yet limited, support for the Houthis over the last decade.<sup>11</sup> Previous surveys of the AOI have demonstrated that the Arab public opinion is critical of Iran's policies in Yemen, with over 60 percent rating them as "bad" or "very bad".<sup>12</sup> The 2022 AOI only surveyed Saudi respondents on their opinion toward Iran's policies in Yemen. According to

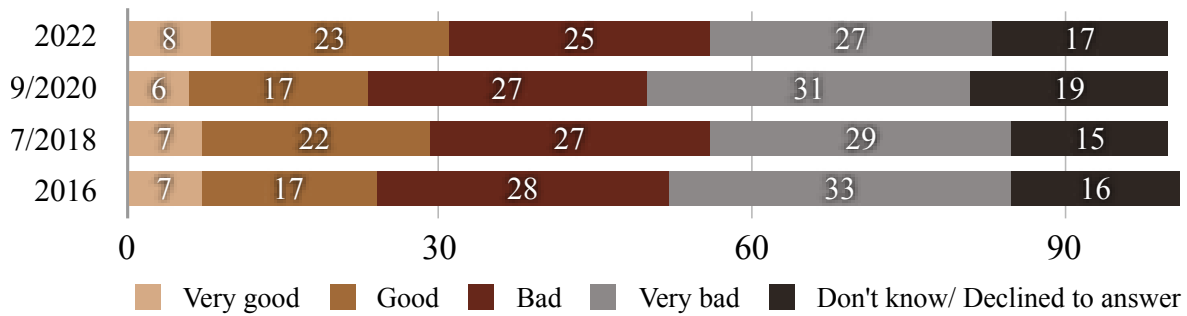
10 Public Opinion Polling Unit, "Palestinian Public Opinion Trends Towards Iranian Foreign Policy," *Siyasat Arabiya*, no. 22 (September 2016).

11 On Iran's role in Yemen and its support for the Houthis, see: Thomas Juneau, "Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: a limited return on a modest investment," *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 3 (May 2016).

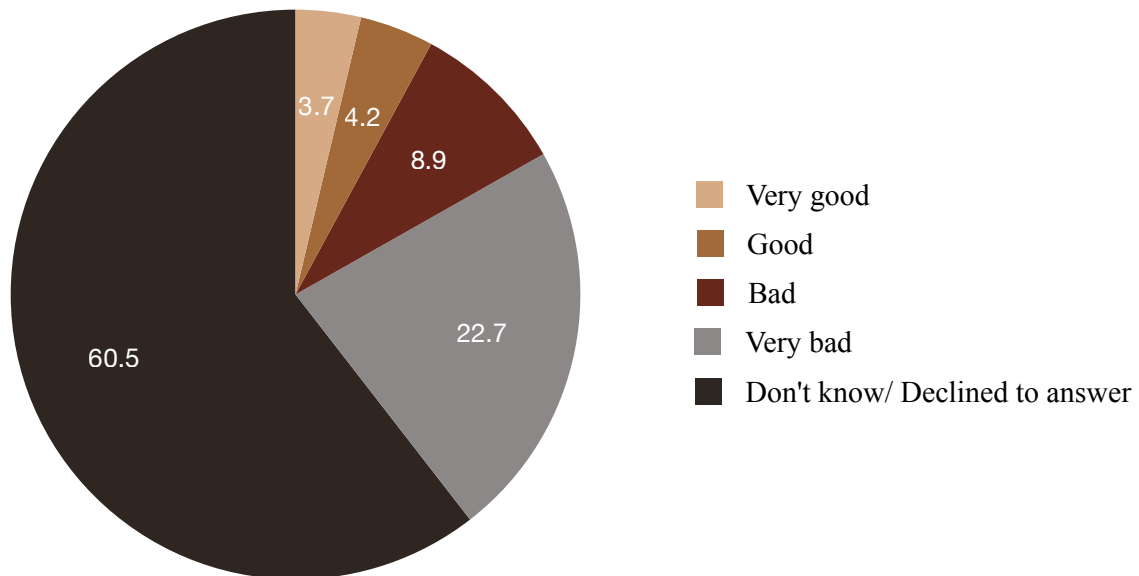
12 Kamrava & Dorzadeh, "Arab Opinion Toward Iran 2019/2020."

Figure 12, while 32 percent viewed Iran's policies as "bad" or "very bad", a considerably high percentage of Saudi respondents (61 percent) responded "do not know" or "declined to answer". Again, suppression of free expression has made it challenging for Saudis to openly discuss topics such as their views on Iran, which may be considered sensitive.

**Figure 11**  
**Public Opinion on Iran's Policies toward Palestine (2016-2022)**



**Figure 12**  
**Saudi Public Opinion on Iran's Policies Toward Yemen (2022)**



The 2022 AOI also does not survey Yemen. However, results from the 2018-2019 Arab Barometer reveal that about 17 percent of Yemeni respondents favour stronger relations with Iran, a decline of 10 percent from 27 percent in 2013. Findings also show that support for ties with Iran is stronger among respondents from Houthi-controlled areas (27 percent), with only 4 percent of those from government-controlled areas favouring the same. This is not surprising given the Iranian backing of the Houthis. Thus, Yemenis are generally not supportive of stronger ties with Iran.<sup>13</sup> Recent Gallup data also demonstrate that 80 percent of Yemenis disapprove of Iran's leadership.<sup>14</sup>

13 "Arab Barometer V: Yemen Country Report," *Report*, Arab Barometer, 2019, accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3qphhJ0>

14 Jay Loschky, "Saudi Arabia's Soft Power Outshines Iran's," *Gallup*, 19/4/2023, accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3CcNw0p>

## Conclusion

Iran and its policies continue to be evaluated negatively by most Arabs. Unlike previous AOI surveys, the 2022 results show that negative perceptions toward Iran are the highest in Iraq, even among its Shia population. The majority of Iraqi respondents also perceived Iran as a threat and were critical of its policies toward Palestine. Saudi Arabia had the lowest negative perception of Iranian policies, even though the majority of the respondents considered Iran a bigger threat. As the data presented here demonstrates, a sectarian split on opinions toward Iran is more prevalent in Lebanon. The Lebanese Shia have the most favourable Iranian sentiments, while the Druze, Christians, and Sunnis have all maintained their resentment towards Iranian policies. Perhaps the biggest takeaway from the recent AOI survey is that Arab perception of Iran appears to be far better than that of Israel and the US. The findings nevertheless demonstrate that Raisi's increased concern for better relations with Arab neighbours has not yet significantly changed how the Arab world views Iran. It also remains to be seen whether the Saudi-Iran agreement will lead to any improvement in Iran's image for the Arab public.

## References

- "A Call for Reform." *Survey*. Arab Youth Survey. 11th Annual ASDA'A BCW Arab Youth Survey. 2019. Accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/45Is3tU>
- "Arab Barometer V: Yemen Country Report." *Report*. Arab Barometer. 2019. Accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3qphhJ0>
- "Arab Youth Survey 2021 – Top 10 Findings." *Survey*. Arab Youth Survey. 13th Annual Edition. 2021. Accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3MOt8b0>
- Alaaldin, Ranj. "What will happen to Iraqi Shiite militias after one key leader's death?" *Brookings*. 3/3/2020. Accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/43Vxxj4>
- Juneau, Thomas. "Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: a limited return on a modest investment." *International Affairs*. vol. 92, no. 3 (May 2016).
- Kamrava, Mehran & Hamideh Dorzadeh. "Arab Opinion Toward Iran 2019/2020." *Studies*. Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies. 22/10/2020. Accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/2WERha8>
- Kamrava, Mehran & Hamideh Dorzadeh. "Back to the Future in Iran: Political and Policy Implications of the 2021 Presidential Elections." *The Muslim World*. vol. 113, no. 1-2 (2023).
- Loschky, Jay. "Saudi Arabia's Soft Power Outshines Iran's." *Gallup*. 19/4/2023. Accessed on 20/6/2023, at: <https://bit.ly/3CcNw0p>
- Public Opinion Polling Unit. "Palestinian Public Opinion Trends Towards Iranian Foreign Policy." *Siyasat Arabiya*. no. 22 (September 2016).