



SEPAD

Sectarianism, Proxies &
De-sectarianisation

Social Relations After COVID-19: LEBANON

A joint project by SEPAD and TOI:
Bringing in the Other Islamists

Introduction

This report draws on the results of surveys carried out during 2021 which explored the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on social relations in Lebanon. It is part of a two country survey that explored a common set of questions in relation to Iraq and Lebanon. Both stand as two key regional states that share a number of commonalities, and also have some important differences. Both have suffered greatly from intervention by external powers in the colonial and modern periods. They have been victims of tragic civil conflicts often drawn along ethno-sectarian lines, and which have also drawn in external actors. Both states have also had to deal with the institutionalisation of sectarian difference through consociational power-sharing arrangements.

Despite such similarities, Iraq and Lebanon have undergone different trajectories in their development as modern nation states, and there are marked disparities between the two in terms of population, ethnic, linguistic and confessional make-up, and integration into the global economy. Regardless, both are often viewed, particularly from the often privileged vantage point of Western academia as classic examples of 'divided societies'.

Understanding the ways in which life is regulated in such 'divided societies' has long been of interest to scholars from a range of academic disciplines, prompting work on a range of different aspects including power sharing, urban politics, socio-economic forces, peace building, the role of religion and the impact of regional politics on various dynamics.

Questions of power, authority, governance, transitional justice, political participation and communal membership all play an important role in understanding cross-cutting divisions within and across societies. This is further complexified by domestic and extraneous challenges faced by regional states, most notably in the cases under investigation here in the form of protest and the Covid-19 pandemic, that can both exacerbate and mitigate against communal difference in social and political life.

The surveys were carried out during 2021 and involved local partner organisations undertaking telephone surveys across a representative range of demographic groups. The questionnaire was devised by a working group of fellows affiliated with the SEPAD and TOI projects,¹ and was based around a common survey instrument used across both cases.

A total of 2039 respondents answered the survey.²

The report offers some compelling findings on the national priorities of Lebanese citizens, and points to widespread dissatisfaction with government performance. Though both Lebanon and Iraq are often viewed through the prism of sectarian relations, respondents in both surveys were more concerned with issues of day to day survival and frustration at a lack of government accountability, than questions around sectarianism. In the Lebanese case, nationality was seen as the strongest marker of respondents' identity, far outweighing religion or sect, thus pointing to a strong sense national consciousness amongst Lebanese. This is in marked contrast to Iraq, where religion was seen as the most important marker of identity.³

¹ Justin Gengler, Simon Mabon, Morten Valbjørn, Jeroen Gunning, Edward Wastnidge and Barbara Yoxon. 'SEPAD' – Sectarianism, Proxies and Desectarianisation project, based at Lancaster University: sepad.org.uk
TOI – 'Bringing in the Other Islamists' project, based at Aarhus University: www.ps.au.dk/toi

² A full breakdown of respondents' demographic data collated during the survey is available on request.

³ The preliminary analysis of the data presented in this report was carried out by Edward Wastnidge, deputy director of SEPAD.

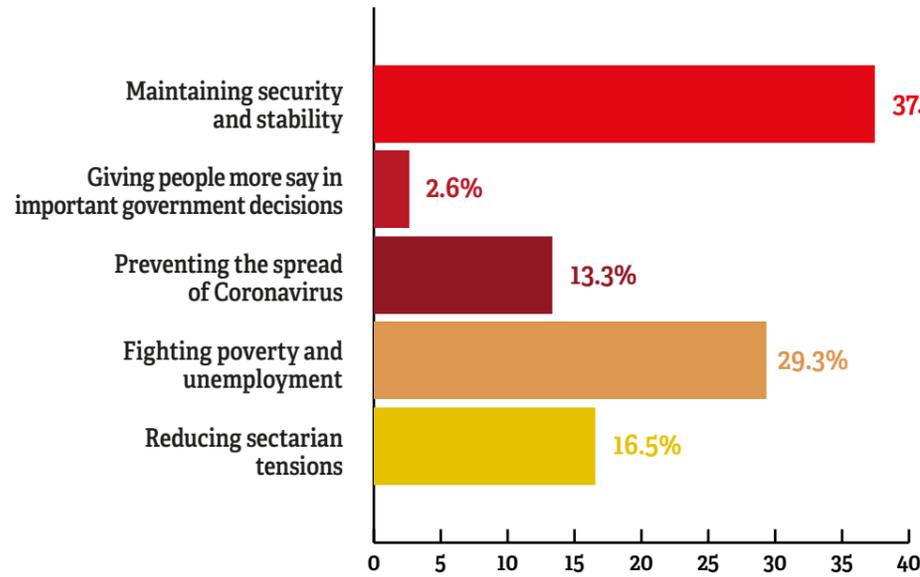
1.

National and local priorities and issues



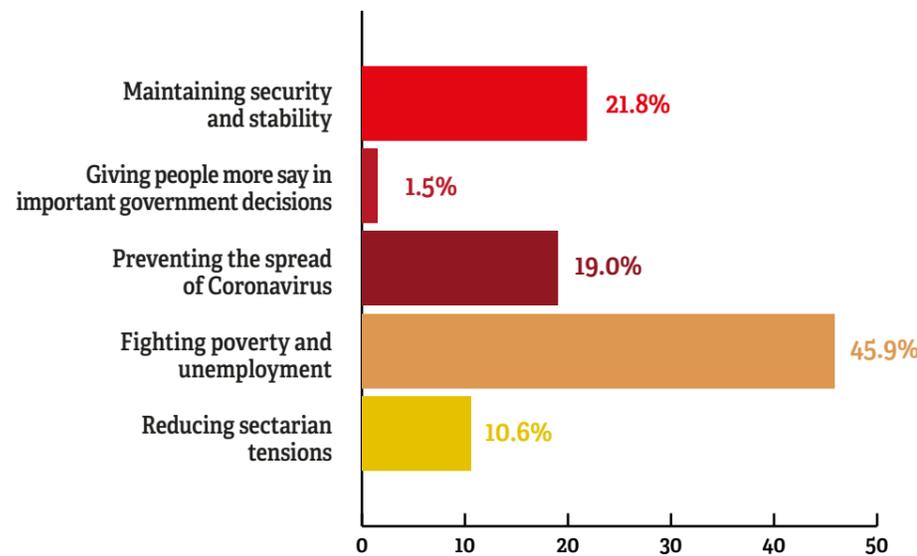
1. National and local priorities and issues

1) National issues that are considered important for Lebanon, ranked in order of importance



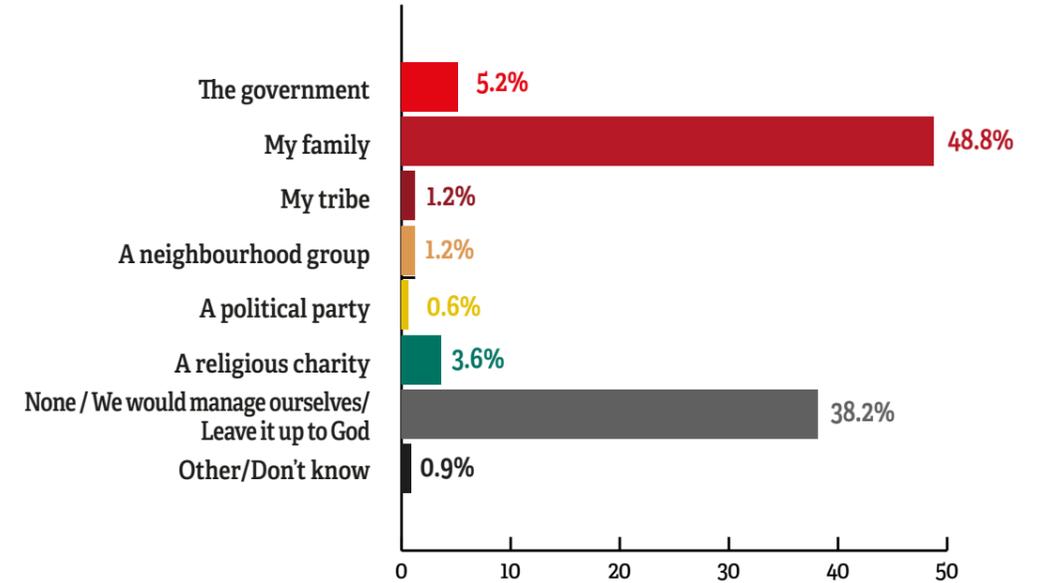
The maintenance of security and stability and fighting poverty and unemployment were considered by the majority of respondents as the most important national issues facing Lebanon respectively, reflecting the perilous state of the country's economic affairs. The ongoing pandemic situation and sectarian tensions were also cited as important national issues.

2) Local issues affecting the neighbourhood where respondents live, ranked in order of importance



Respondents' priorities at the local level reflected broader national concerns, although with a greater emphasis on fighting poverty than maintaining security. Highlights how local concerns are more tied up with everyday economic survival in a state struggling to cope with multiple crises.

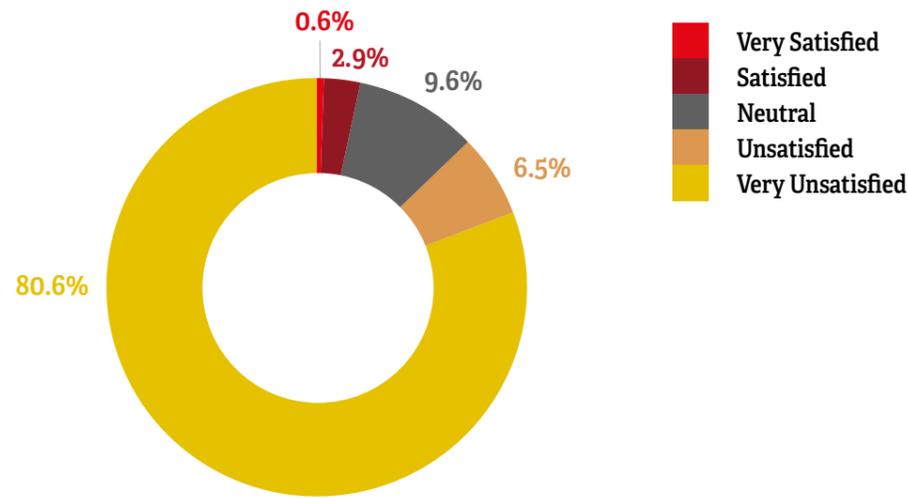
3) If respondent/their families were negatively impacted financially by Coronavirus and needed help, where would they turn to for assistance?



Shows how family remains the main source of support during this period, though a large percentage also chose 'none'. Other actors, including government, religious and local organisations were only considered by a minority.



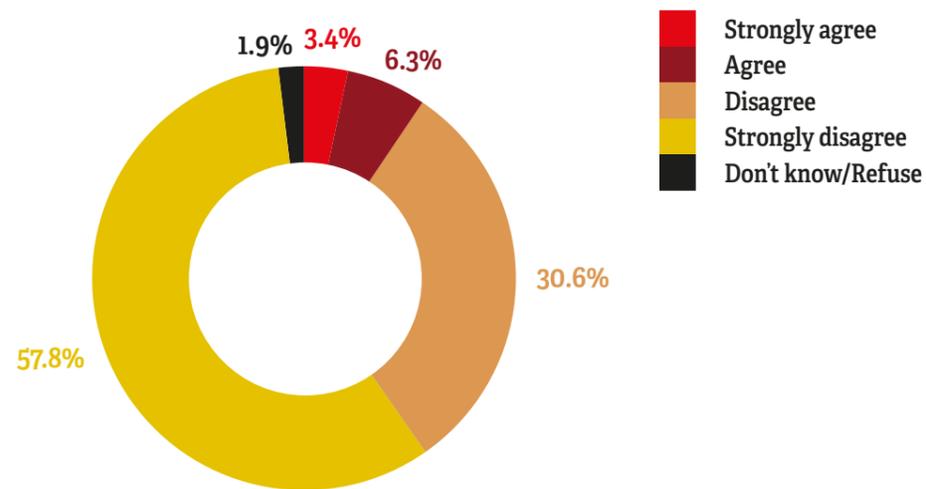
4) Overall satisfaction with government performance



A massive majority giving the lowest possible score – reflects widespread dissatisfaction with government performance, and perhaps the regular periods of political paralysis the country has experienced.

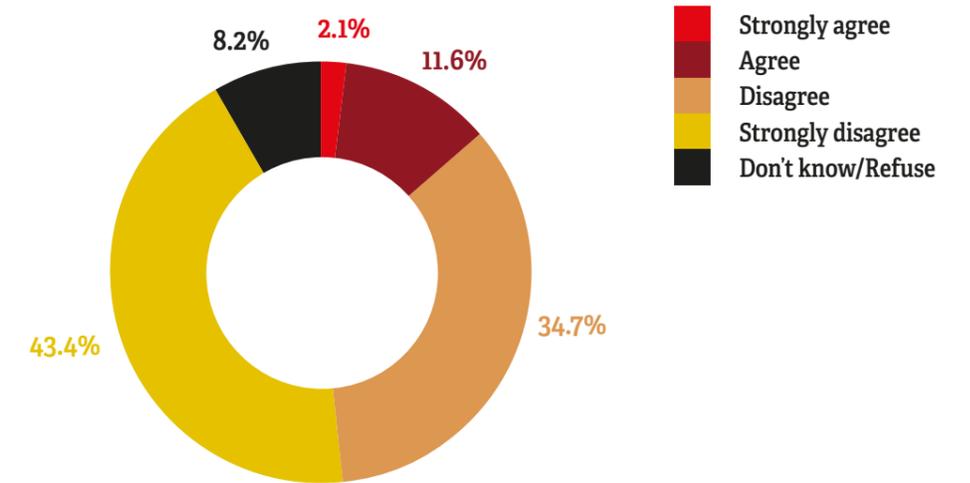
5) Views on state performance. 4 questions based on statements with responses of: strongly agree; agree; disagree; strongly disagree.

a) 'Public officials in Lebanon provide services to citizens without expecting anything in return'



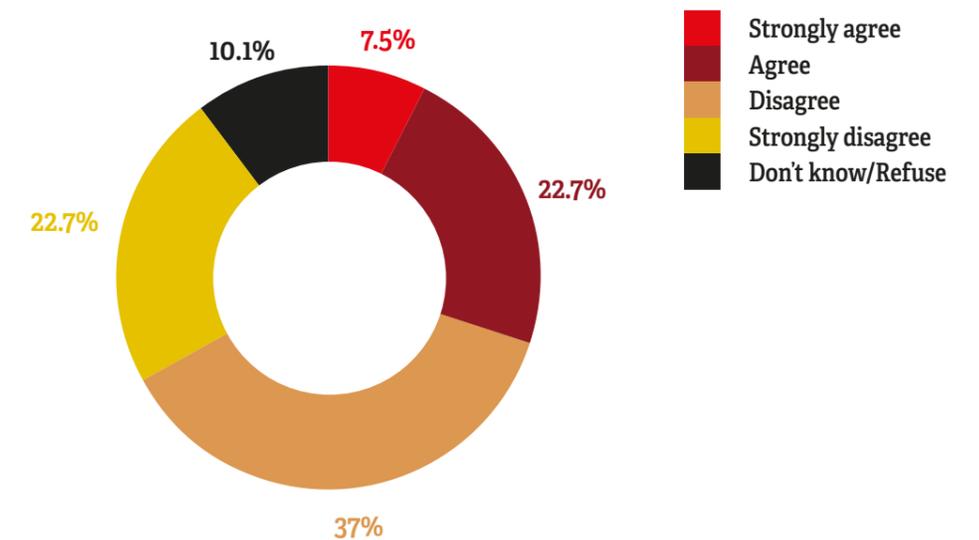
Huge majority expressing negative attitude regarding public officials evidence widespread dissatisfaction with the how politics functions in Lebanon.

b) 'In general, religious parties and organisations are more honest than non-religious parties and organisations'



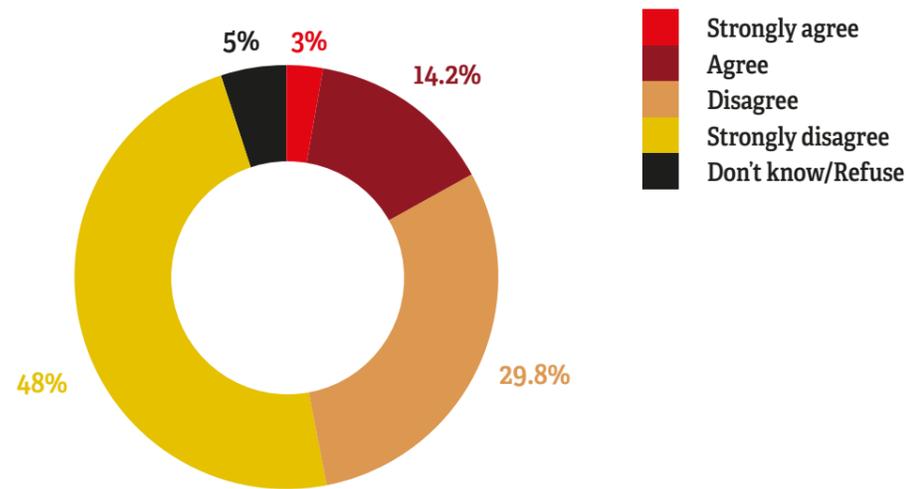
Significant majority also negatively responded to idea that religious parties might be more honest – potentially reflecting dissatisfaction with entrenched sectarian elites.

c) 'Democratic regimes are not effective at maintaining order and stability'



A more mixed picture, but still a broadly negative one in terms of democratic regimes being better able to manage order. Reflects Lebanese experience of domestic unrest in spite of democratic political system.

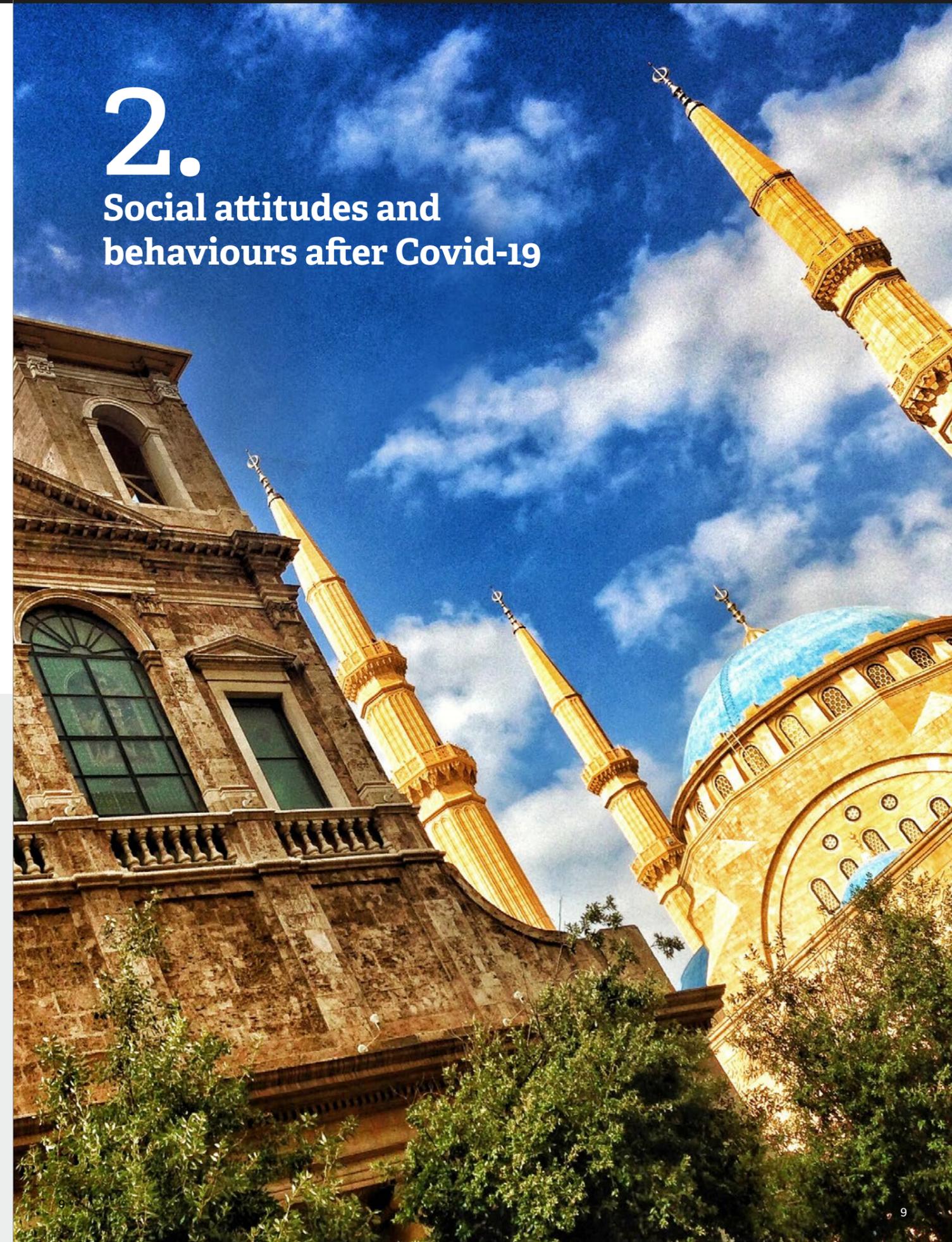
d) Religion should inform all political decisions the government makes, including regarding Coronavirus



A clear majority indicated that they were against religion informing political decision-making in Lebanon, though a significant minority thought that religion should have some role.

Synopsis of national and local priorities and issues

- Key national and local priorities in Lebanon centre around maintaining security and fighting poverty. Security is the main national priority with a shift in emphasis towards poverty alleviation at local level. This likely reflects the ongoing financial crisis and economic instability in the country.
- Family is considered the main source of support.
- Massive dissatisfaction with government performance (over 80%), and major lack of trust in political officials. Lack of trust in religious organisations and their potential political role, and also with democratic regimes - possibly reflecting disillusionment with sectarian elites and Lebanese political system.
- Only a small minority of respondents saw having a greater say in government decisions as being a priority, reflecting more immediate day to day concerns and political apathy.

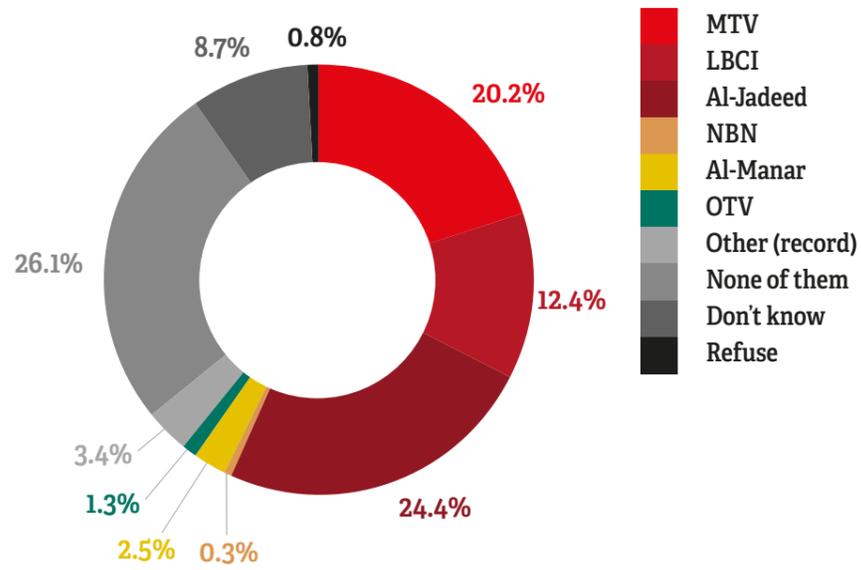


2.

Social attitudes and behaviours after Covid-19

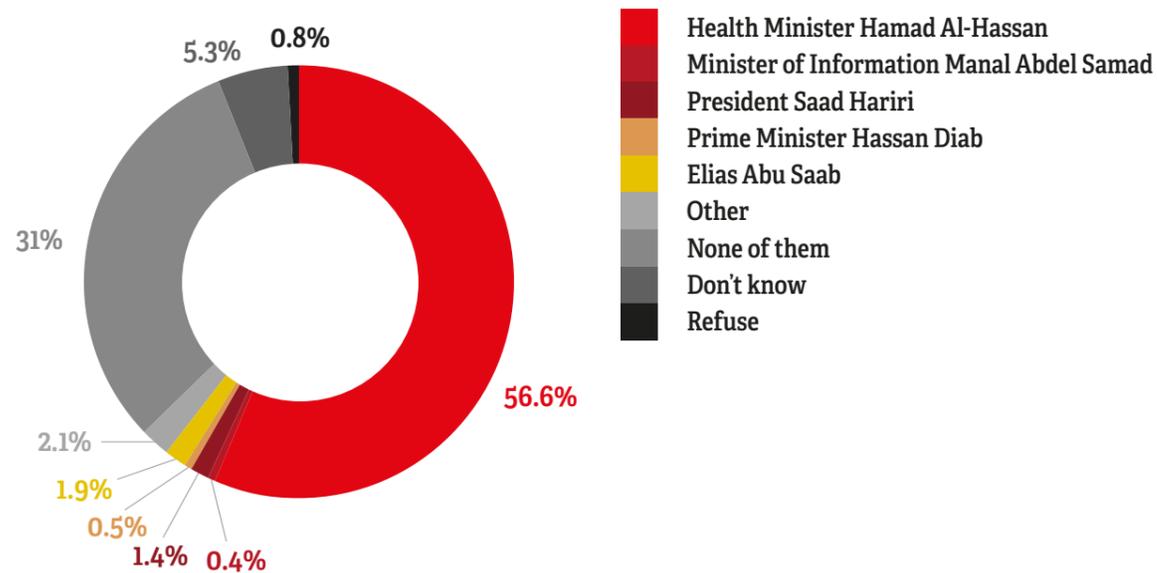
2. Social attitudes and behaviours after Covid-19

1) Which of the following local media outlets provided the most honest coverage of the Coronavirus outbreak in Lebanon?



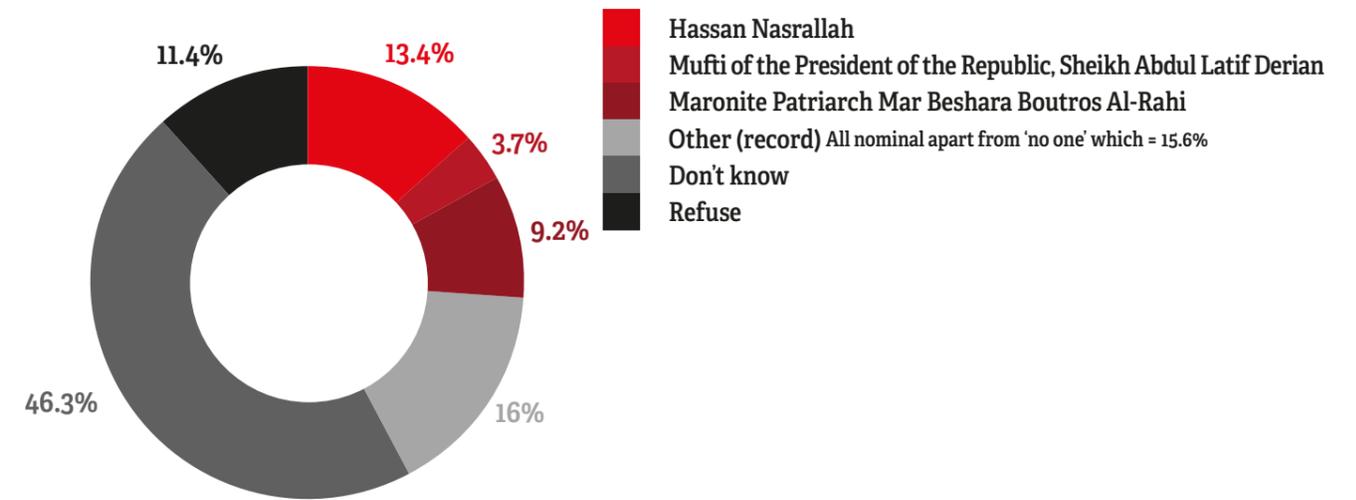
Al-Jadeed and MTV the most popular, with LBCI in third. Perhaps more tellingly though, is that the highest percentage did not think that any local media provided the most honest coverage.

2) Which local or regional political leader would you say has done the best job handling the Coronavirus pandemic?



Majority thought that Health Minister al-Hassan had done the best job, though a large minority (31%) thought that none of them had.

3) Which religious scholar do you think has provided the best guidance to individuals?

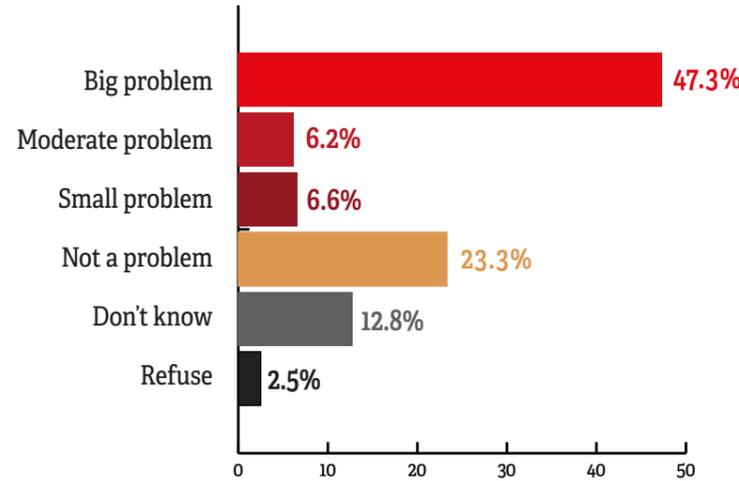


Nasrallah proved to be the most popular compared to other key leaders, however, 'don't know' received the highest percentage. Points to religious leaders not really having a major role regarding pandemic response.



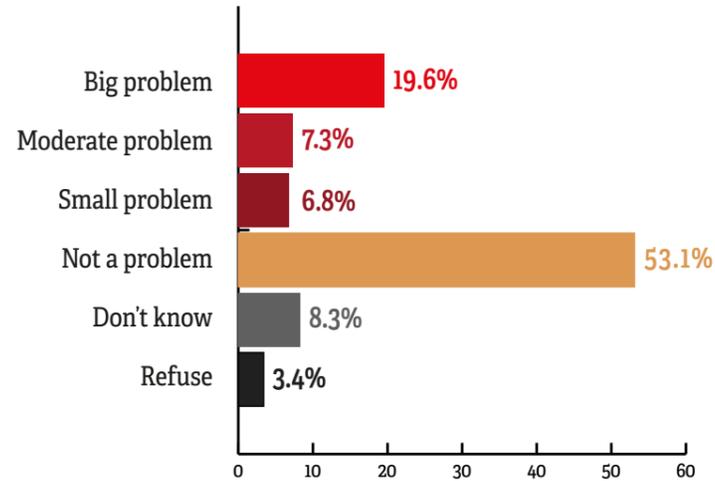
4) How big of a problem are tensions between the following groups in Lebanon nowadays?

a) Government supporters and opposition supporters



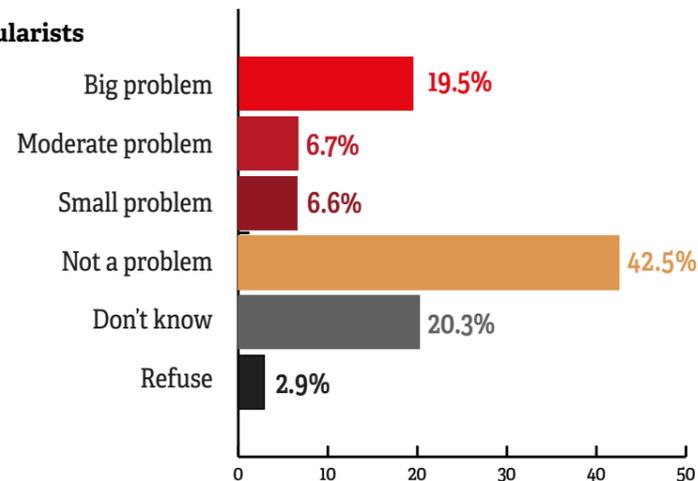
A majority of respondents saw tensions between government supporters and opposition supporters as a problem, with most seeing it as a big issue. A significant minority did not see this as constituting a problem.

b) Sunni and Shi'a



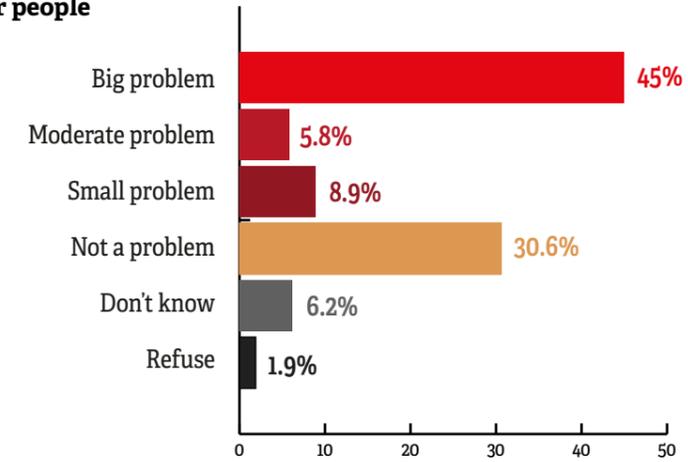
Majority do not see this as a big issue, so not seen as a major source of tension, though a sizeable minority do see it as a big problem. This points to some, possibly localised, existing tensions, but this sectarian divide is not seen as a major national issue, according to respondents.

c) Islamists and secularists



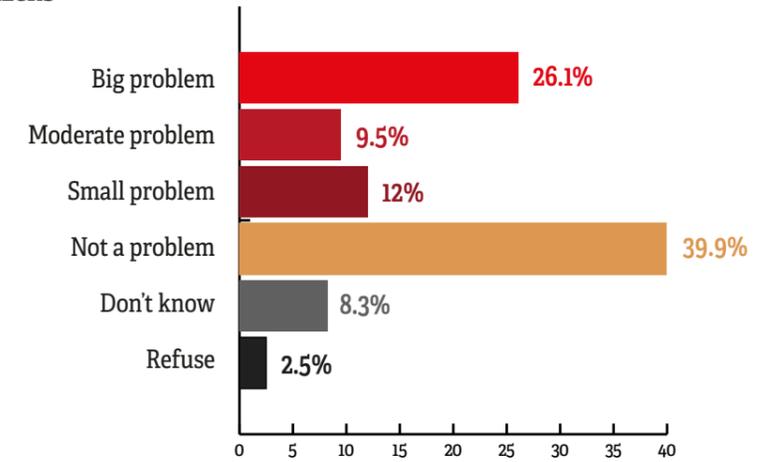
Similar to Sunni/Shia but much higher percentage of 'don't knows' reflects possible ambiguity of interpretation, i.e. identification of what it means to be Islamist or secularist in Lebanon today.

d) Rich people and poor people



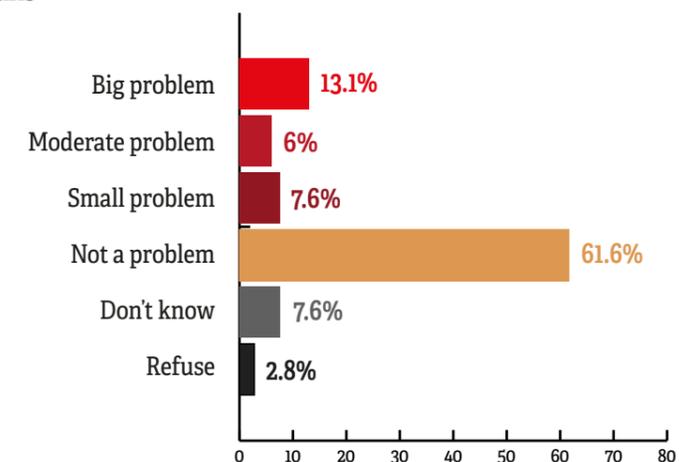
The question of tensions between rich and poor produced a quite polarised response. Most respondents saw this as a big problem, though a sizable minority did not recognise it as such.

e) Citizens and non-citizens



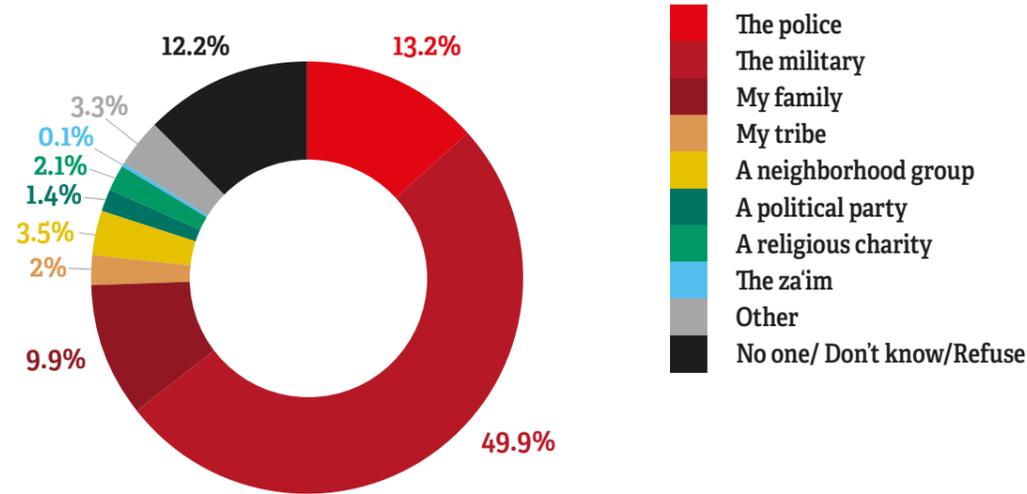
The responses showed that people viewed this as a problem of varying degrees overall, although a many saw it as not a problem.

f) Muslims and Christians



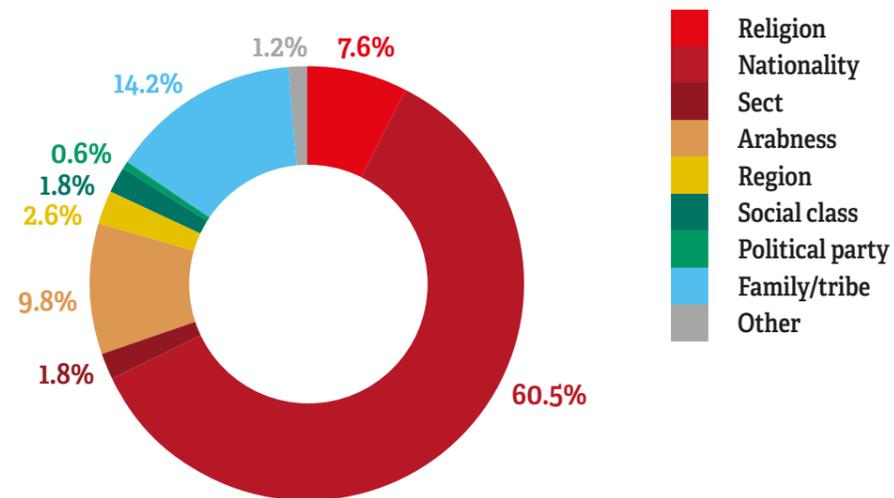
Much like option b (Sunni/Shia), sectarian tensions between Muslims and Christians was not seen as a problem by an overall majority. However, a reasonable minority did cite it as a problem of varying degrees.

5) If social unrest occurred in your neighbourhood due to coronavirus, which entity would you most trust to resolve it?



A significant majority expressed trust in the military around this issue, with the police a distant second.

6) Overall, which of the following identities is most important?



A significant majority rated nationality as the most important identity in Lebanon, highlighting a strong national consciousness that far outweighs other markers of identity. Family/tribe and Arabness came distant 2nd and 3rd respectively, with a small minority citing religion and nominal number of respondents citing sect.

3.

Political attitudes and behaviours after Covid-19

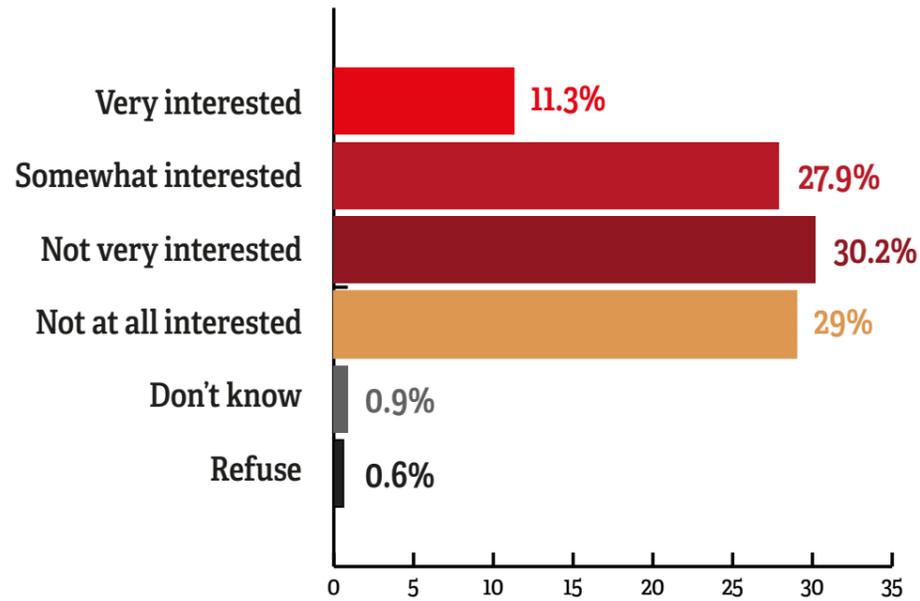


Synopsis for social attitudes and behaviours after Covid-19

- General lack of trust in local media reporting
- Broad support for efforts of Health Minister, but also significant lack of enthusiasm for any political leaders' efforts over Covid
- Among religious leaders, Nasrallah seen as giving best advice to individuals, but more feel that none have.
- Biggest source of friction/contention is between government supporters and opposition, with polarised responses in terms of relations between rich/poor and citizens/non-citizens, the latter in particular pointing to differing views around Lebanon's large non-citizen and refugee population. Sectarian tensions not seen as an issue for the majority, though some reasonably sized minorities do think there are some problems.
- Trust in military to solve disputes much higher than alternative authorities (e.g. police)
- Nationality by far the most prominent marker of identity among Lebanese, reflects strong national consciousness. Sect scores very low.

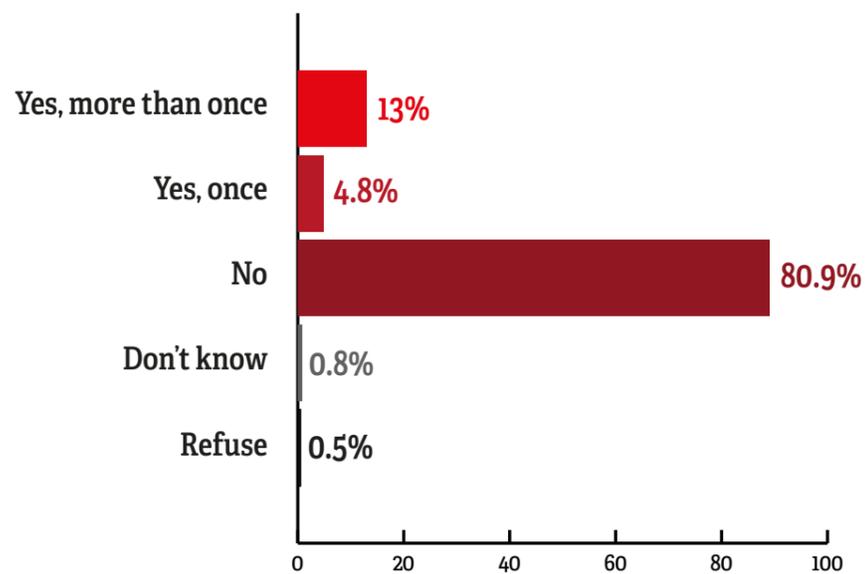
3. Political attitudes and behaviours after Covid-19

1) Coronavirus has caused some people to lose interest in politics, while others have become more interested. For you personally, to what extent are you interested in politics?



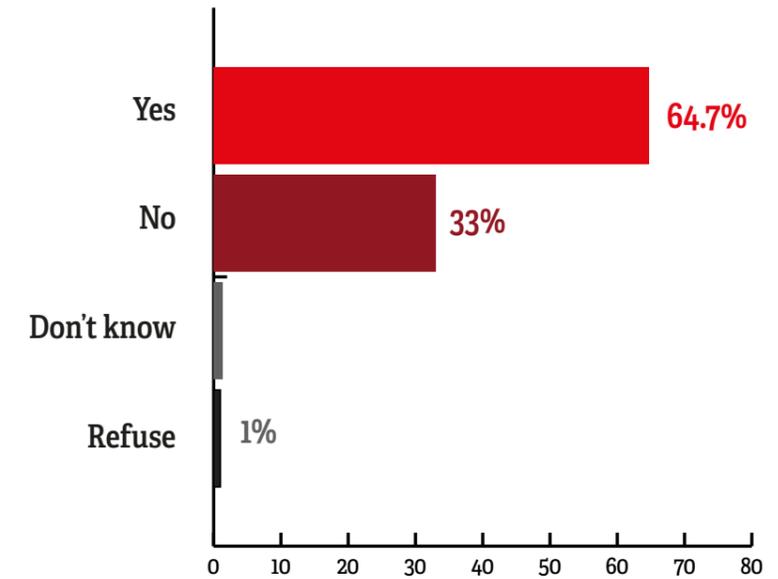
An overall majority of respondents expressed a lack of interest in politics in Lebanon, reflecting the more immediate concerns of day to day life, and potential lack of belief in the efficacy of politics in the country

2) Have you ever taken part in a protest or demonstration for a political cause?



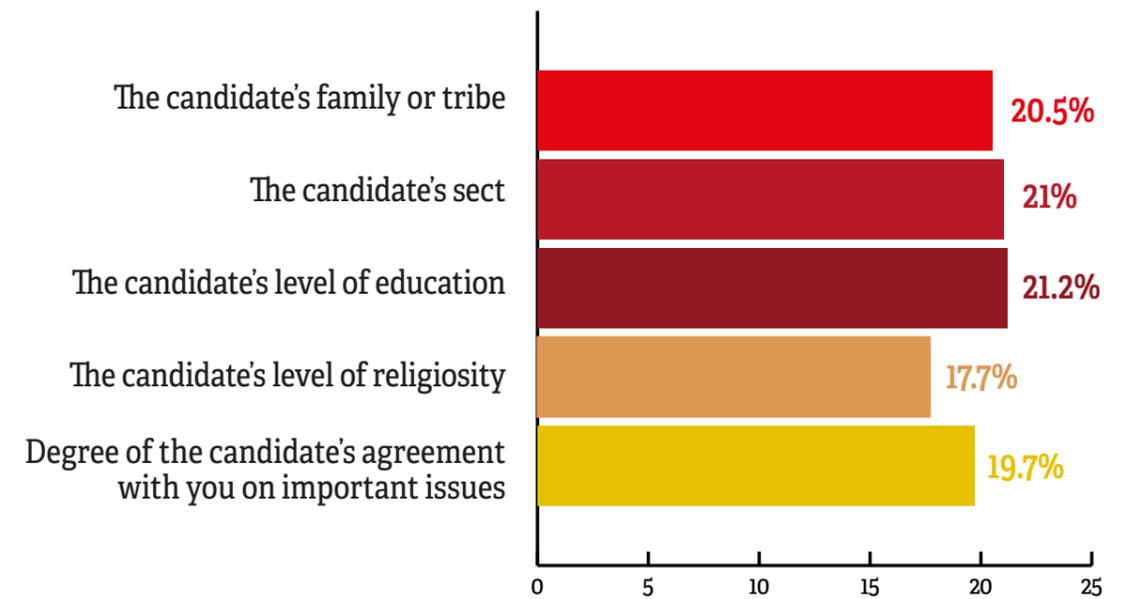
A vast majority of respondents have never taken part in a protest or demonstration. Again, this likely reflects the more immediate concerns of respondents surrounding economic hardships, security, and day to day living in Lebanon.

3) Did you participate in the most recent parliamentary elections that took place in Lebanon in May 2018?



A majority of respondents participated in the most recent elections, with a sizable minority choosing not to vote. The participation rate here is similar to the global average for turnout in legislative elections.

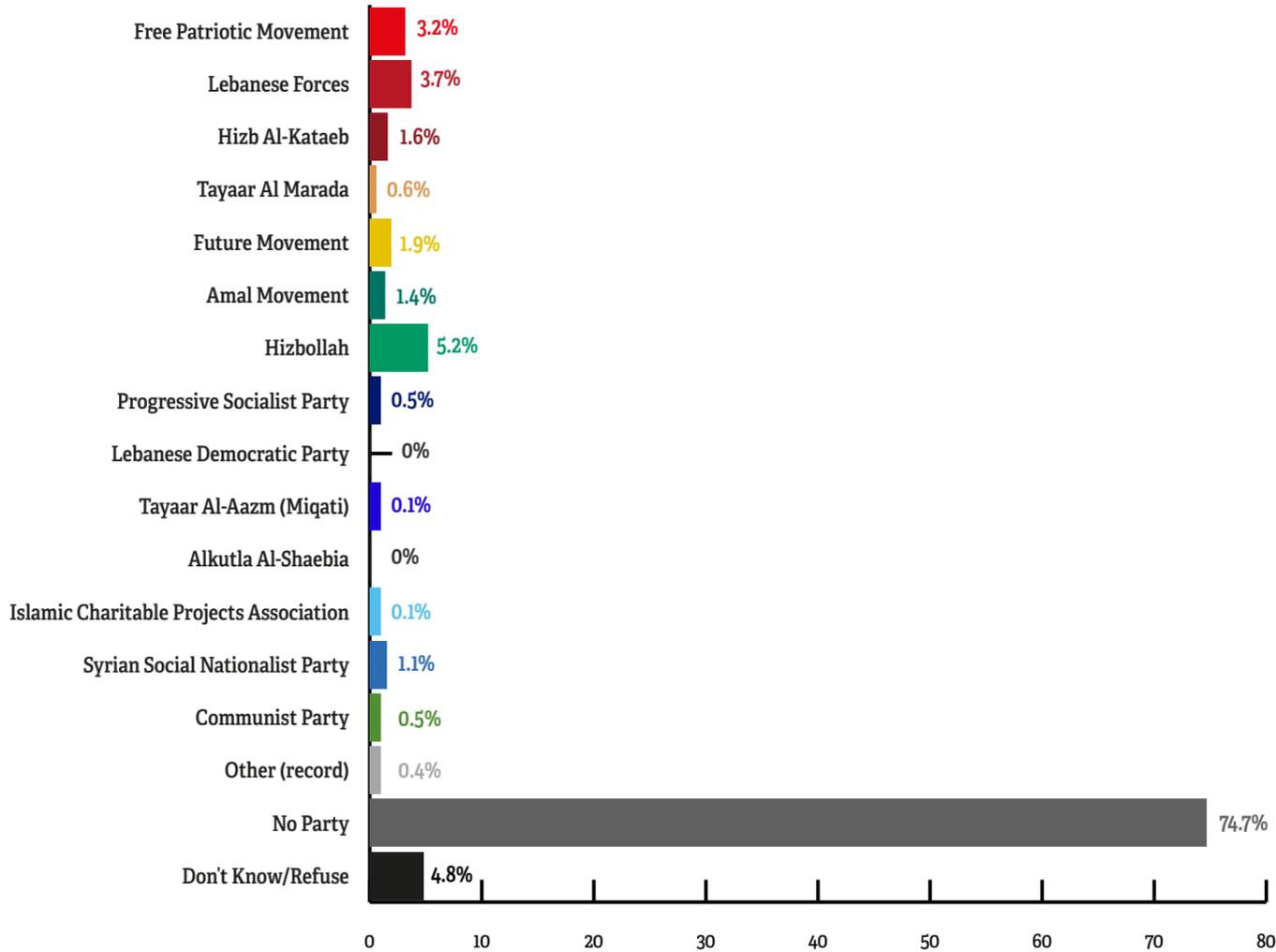
4) When voting for candidates in parliamentary elections, which of the following is the most important factor in influencing your choice?



The responses to this question produced a fairly even split, with no clear factor predominating, thus reflecting different priorities among the Lebanese electorate.

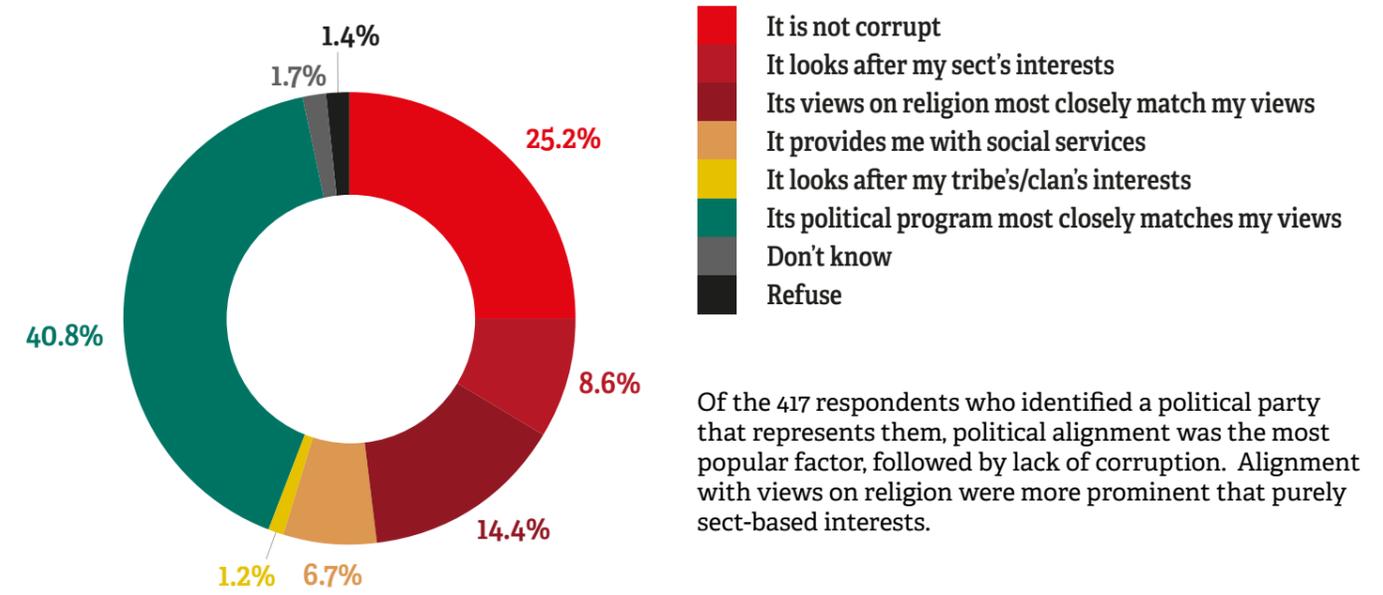
5) Political party representation regardless of whether you vote in elections

a) Which of the following political parties most closely represents your viewpoints on important issues?

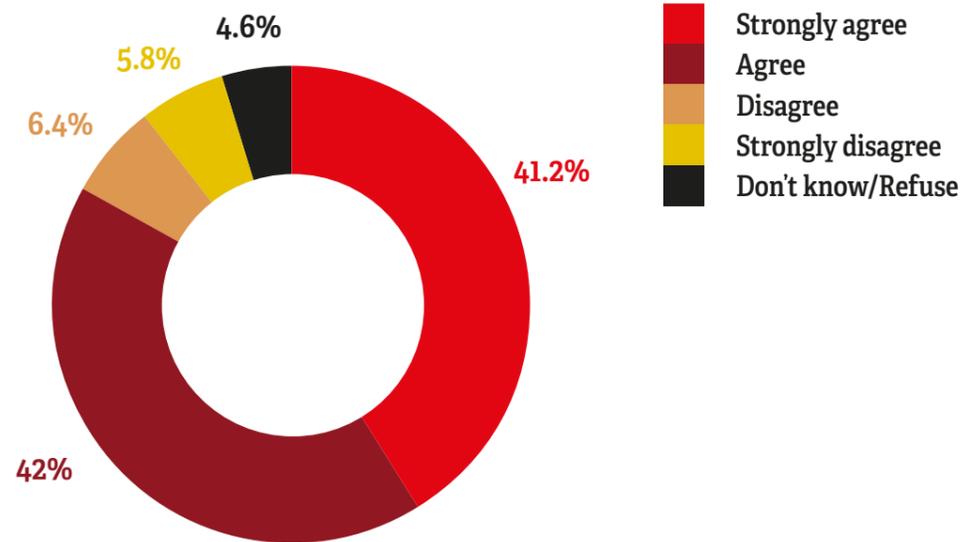


A very large majority responded that 'no party' closely represented their views on important issues. This corresponds to overall dissatisfaction with political life in Lebanon expressed throughout the survey. From the established political parties in Lebanon, Hezbollah came out on top at just over 5%.

b) And what is the main factor that attracts you to this party?



6) To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: “A politician belonging to a sect different than yours can represent your concerns or solve the problems you and your community face.”



A large majority of respondents do not see sectarian affiliation as determining a politician's ability to serve them and their community.

Synopsis of political attitudes and behaviours after Covid-19

- A general apathy and lack of interest in following politics.
- A vast majority have never attended a protest or demonstration for a political cause, pointing perhaps to more immediate concerns of day to day survival.
- Political participation (voting) largely in line with turnout in other democracies – 64.7%
- No clear predominant factor in influencing choice of who to vote for, with a fairly even split between family, sect, education, religiosity, and agreement on important issues.
- Vast majority (74%) felt no party reflected their views on important issues. Reflects wider dissatisfaction with parties and system. Biggest share of response for an actual party went to Hezbollah, but still only 5% of respondents.
- Sectarian affiliation not seen as determining a politician's ability to serve them and their community by majority (over 80%)



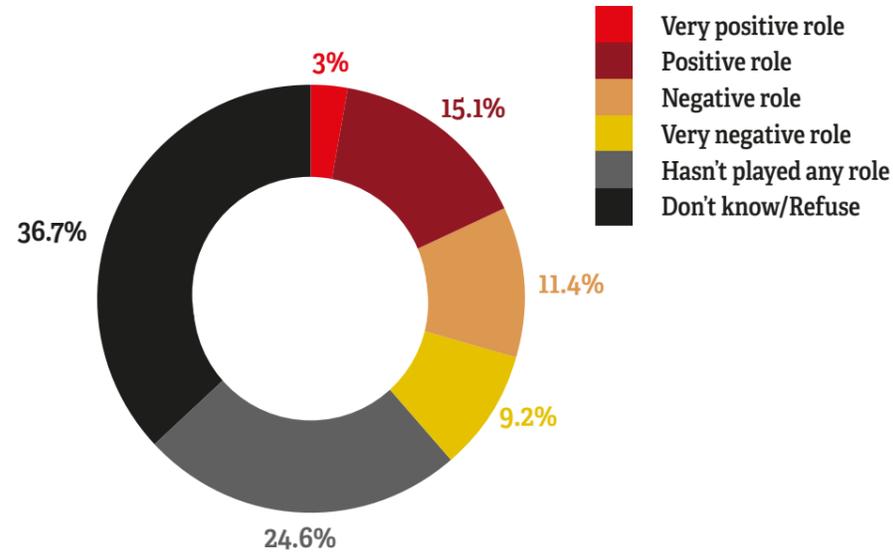
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Views of regional relations after Covid-19

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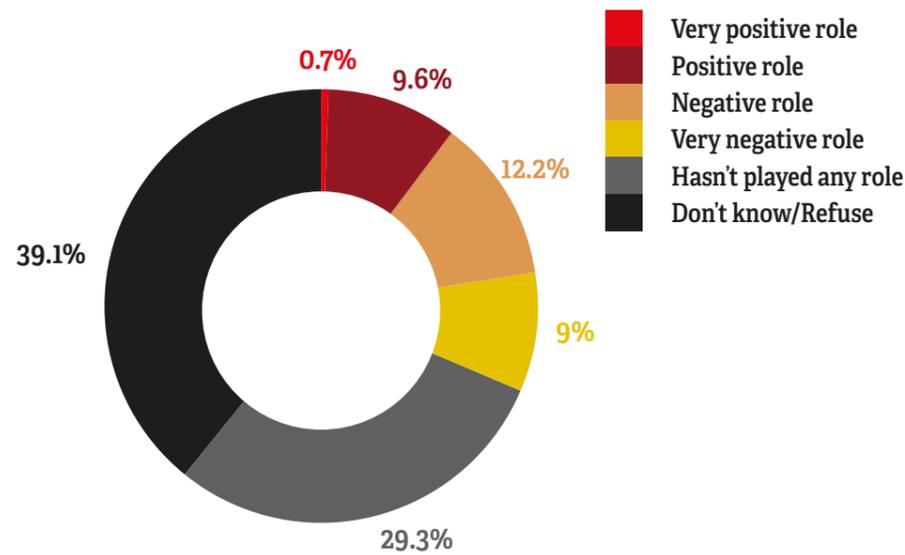
1) In your opinion, to what extent have the following countries played a positive or negative role in addressing the Coronavirus crisis in Lebanon

a) China



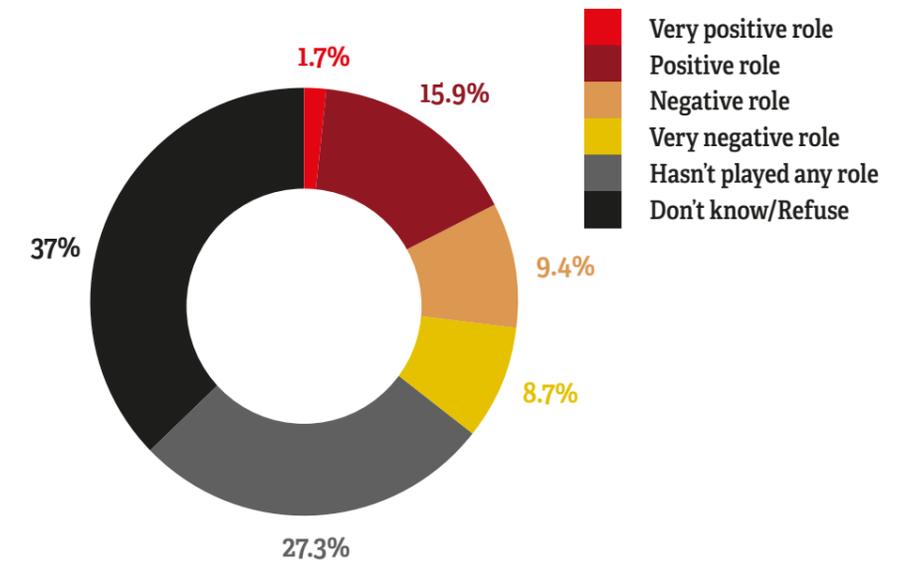
As with all those put to respondents, majority think they either haven't played any kind of role re Covid, or they don't know. Of those who do, it is slightly more negative.

b) Iran



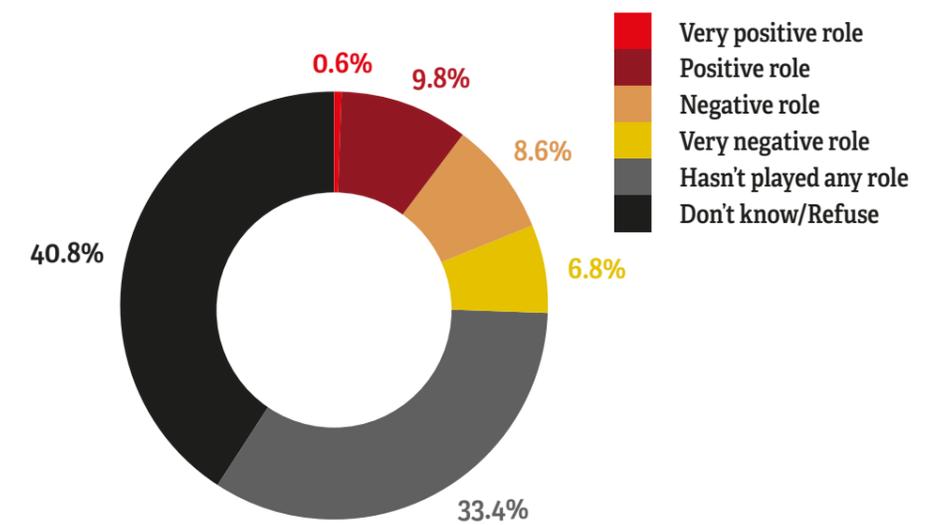
Of those who do think Iran has played a role, which are in a minority overall, the perception is generally more negative.

c) United States



Of those who do think that the USA has played a role, which are in a minority overall, the perception is fairly well-balanced between negative and positive.

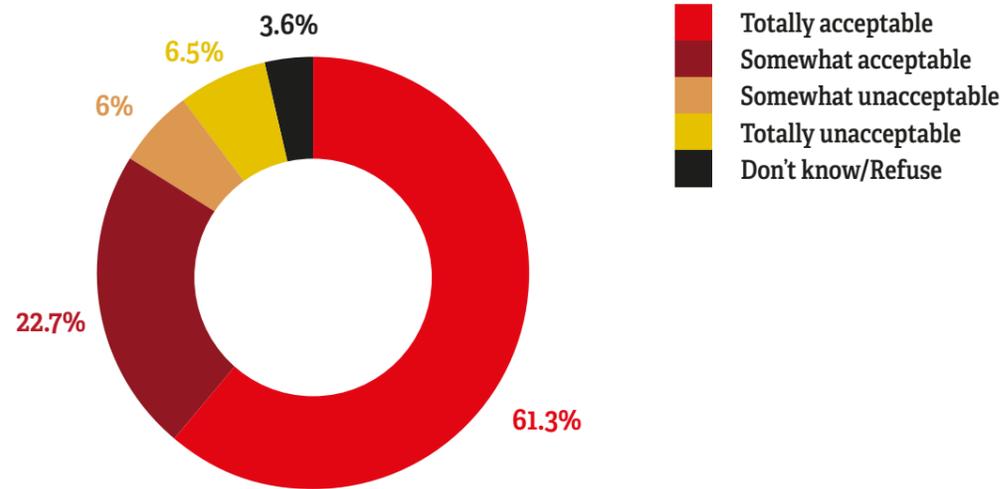
d) Saudi Arabia



Of those who do think that Saudi Arabia has played a role, which are in a minority overall, the perception is generally more negative.

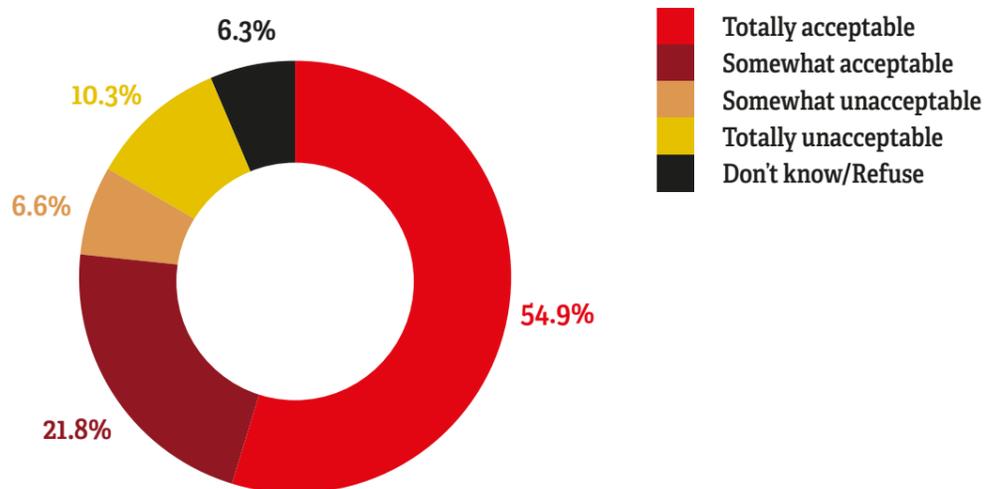
2) To what extent would each of the following types of involvement from foreign parties be acceptable in order to help Lebanon address the Coronavirus pandemic? For each one, please say whether you think it would be totally acceptable, somewhat acceptable, somewhat unacceptable, or totally unacceptable.

a) Financial aid to pay salaries



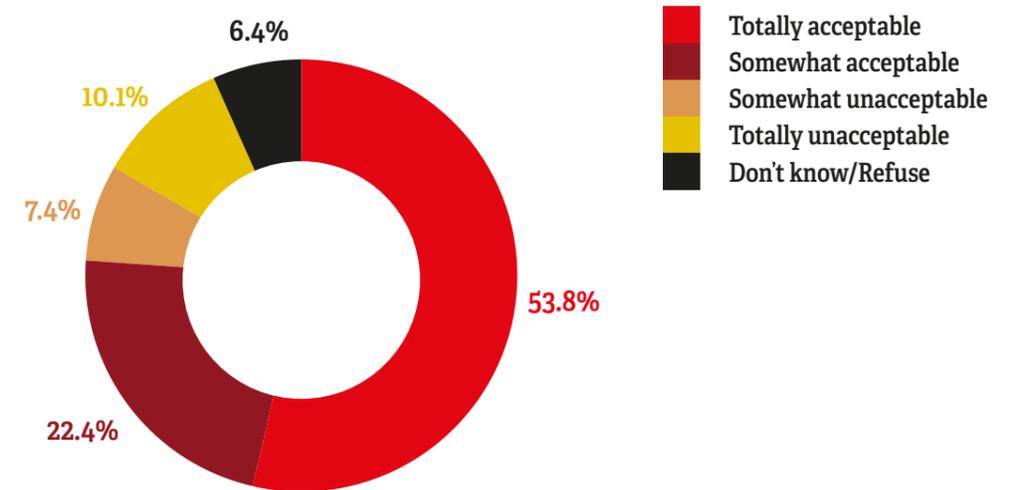
A large majority of respondents were in favour of receiving foreign financial aid to pay salaries, likely reflecting the significant role played by foreign finance in Lebanon.

b) Military assistance in the case of breakdown in law and order



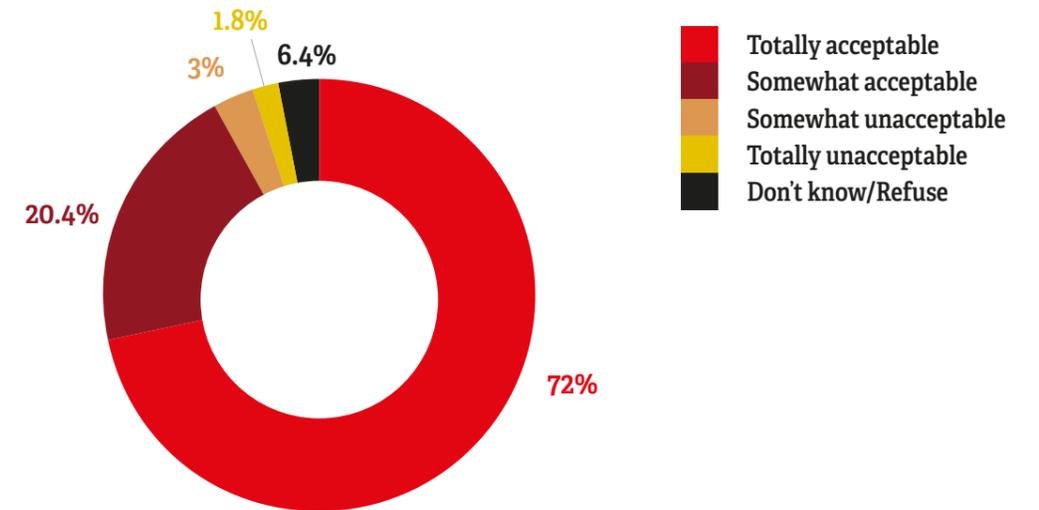
A majority of respondents were in favour of foreign military intervention in case of breakdown in law and order, perhaps reflecting the long history of external involvement in country.

c) Police assistance in the case of breakdown in law and order



As with military assistance, a significant majority of respondents declared that they would accept foreign assistance in policing matters

d) Providing medical supplies or vaccine



A vast majority were in favour of external support in the provision of medical supplies, reflecting lack of belief in government ability to combat such crises.

Synopsis of views of regional relations after Covid-19

- Majority of respondents think the countries (China, Iran, USA, Saudi) either 'haven't played any kind of role' re Covid, or they 'don't know'. In all cases these percentages far outweigh any sense of positive or negative role by them
 - Overall, the USA is the only state that doesn't have a broadly negative outcome in terms of Covid assistance.
 - Majority of respondents in support of foreign intervention in terms of financial aid, military intervention and provisions of medical aid, in case of a breakdown in law and order.
- Of those who felt they had a role:
- China, Iran and Saudi seen as generally more negative than positive role

About SEPAD

Sectarianism, Proxies and De-Sectarianisation

SEPAD (the Sectarianism, Proxies and De-sectarianisation project) is an international research network and collaborative project based at Lancaster University's Richardson Institute, the oldest peace and conflict research centre in the United Kingdom.

Under the direction of Professor Simon Mabon and Dr Edward Wastnidge, SEPAD brings together more than 60 world renowned experts and early career scholars from over 20 countries in pursuit of knowledge production, policy engagement, impact and outreach activities, media work, and the raising of public awareness around questions of sectarianism, de-sectarianisation, and the (international) politics of the Middle East. Since its formation in 2018, SEPAD has positioned itself as a leading global hub of research and expertise for all matters related to the emergence, evolution, and exploitation of sect-based difference in the region and beyond.

Thanks to the cutting-edge expertise and close collaboration within SEPAD's team, our work delivers comprehensive answers to multi-faceted problems operating across areas of study and disciplines, including Political Science, International Relations, Political Economy, Law, Criminology, Sociology, Political Geography, Anthropology, History, Area Studies and Linguistics. SEPAD receives generous funding from Carnegie Corporation of New York and has received funding from The Henry Luce Foundation.

sepad.org.uk

TOI: Bringing in the Other Islamists - comparing Arab Shia and Sunni Islamism(s) in a sectarianised Middle East.

Research on Islamism has remained predominantly Sunni-centric. This project brings 'the Other Islamists' – Shia Islamists – into the debate on Islamism in the Arab Middle East. It uses a cross-disciplinary theoretical approach which takes religion seriously without essentialising it, to explore whether, and if so, how and why, Shia Islamism(s) differ from their Sunni counterparts.

The project focuses on three research puzzles drawn from the Islamism and sectarianisation debates: 1) to what extent are Islamist movements shaped by their context, to what extent by their religious identity/ideology/institutions; 2) to what extent and how does the importance of sect-coded identities for Islamist movements change over time and how has this affected/been affected by the process of sectarianisation; 3) what role does sectarian othering play in intra-sect competition within the current sectarianized milieu.

These questions are examined through three WPs made up of comparative and within-case-studies of key Islamist movements in Kuwait, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria and Bahrain. The studies are carried out by a team of internationally leading experts. The TOI Project is funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark.

www.ps.au.dk/toi





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