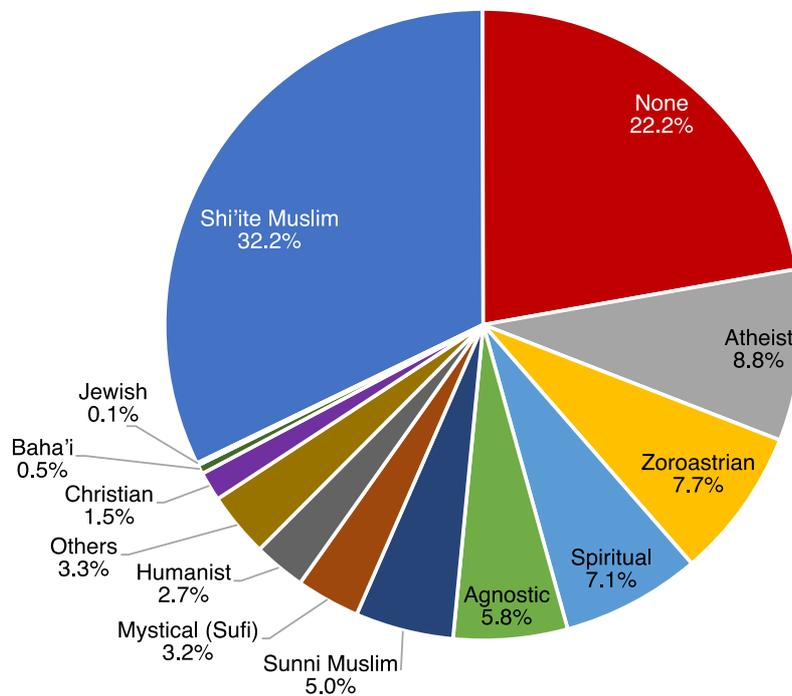




IRANIANS' ATTITUDES TOWARD RELIGION: A 2020 SURVEY REPORT



**The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in IRAN
(GAMAAN)**

AMMAR MALEKI

Assistant Professor of Comparative Politics, Tilburg University

POOYAN TAMIMI ARAB

Assistant Professor of Religious Studies, Utrecht University

August 2020, The Netherlands

This study was financially supported by and carried out in cooperation with Dr. Ladan Boroumand, cofounder of and senior fellow at the Abdorrahman Boroumand Center for Human Rights in Iran. We express our sincere gratitude to her and all the volunteers who, in one way or another, assisted us in conducting the June 2020 survey on Iranians' attitudes toward religion.

Any use of this research or parts thereof is permitted only if properly cited:

Maleki, Ammar and Pooyan Tamimi Arab. 2020. *Iranians' attitudes toward religion: A 2020 survey report*. Published online, gamaan.org: GAMAAN.



The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN) is an independent, non-profit research foundation registered in the Netherlands. Copyright © 2020 GAMAAN. All rights reserved.

Website: www.gamaan.org E-mail: info@gamaan.org

Twitter: [@gamaanresearch](https://twitter.com/gamaanresearch) Telegram: [/gamaanresearch](https://t.me/gamaanresearch) Instagram: [/gamaanresearch](https://www.instagram.com/gamaanresearch)

Survey summary

- The survey titled “Iranians’ attitudes toward religion” was conducted from June 6 to 21, 2020. Over 50 thousand respondents were surveyed, around 90% of whom lived in Iran.
- This study’s findings reflect the views of literate Iranian residents aged above 19, who comprise 85% of Iran’s adult population. The results can be generalized to the target population with a 95% credibility level and credibility intervals of 5%. The survey aimed to measure and document the attitudes of Iranians toward religion and related political concepts, none of which can be openly discussed in Iran due to the current restrictions.
- The results show that 78% of Iranians believe in God, 37% believe in life after death, 30% believe in heaven and hell, 26% believe jinns exist, and 26% believe in the coming of a savior. Around 20% of the target population does not believe in any of the abovementioned.
- While 32% of the population identifies as Shi’ite Muslim, around 9% identify as atheist, 8% as Zoroastrian, 7% as spiritual, 6% as agnostic, and 5% as Sunni Muslim. Others stated that they identify with or follow Sufi mysticism, humanism, Christianity, the Baha’i faith, or Judaism, among other worldviews. Around 22% identified with none of the above.
- Approximately half of the population reported losing their religion. On the other hand, 41% did not report significant changes in religious or non-religious views during their lifetime. Around 6% of the population said they had converted from one religious orientation to another.
- Around 60% reported that they do not pray, while around 40% differed in their reported frequency of praying, among whom over 27% reported praying five times a day.
- 61% of the population hails from a family environment characterized by belief in God and being religious, while 32% reported growing up in a “believing but not religious” family. Less than 3% was raised in an “unbelieving” or “anti-religious” family.
- 68% of the population believes that religious prescriptions should be excluded from state legislation, even if believers hold a parliamentary majority. However, 14% of the population thinks that the nation’s law should invariably accord with religious prescriptions.
- 71% hold the opinion that religious institutions should be responsible for their own funding. On the other hand, 10% thinks that all religious organizations, irrespective of their faith, should receive government support, while over 3% say only Islamic institutions are entitled to such benefits.

- 41% think that all religions should have a right to public proselytizing, while only 4% think this right should be exclusively reserved for Muslims. However, 43% of the population agreed with a blanket prohibition for all religions against proselytizing.
- 56% do not want their children to receive religious education at school, but around 54% approve of their children having the opportunity to learn about diverse faiths at school.
- 58% said they do not believe in the hijab (Islamic veil covering the hair) altogether. Around 72% opposed the compulsory hijab, while 15% insist on the legal obligation to wear the hijab in public.
- Despite legally enforced alcohol temperance, about 35% of the population drink occasionally or regularly. On the other hand, 56% report that they do not consume alcoholic drinks. Almost 9% does not drink due to their inability to purchase alcoholic drinks (either due to inaccessibility or high price).

Section 1: Sampling methods and sample characteristics

1.1. Survey and raw sample characteristics

- The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in Iran (GAMAAN) conducted the “Iranians’ attitudes toward religion” (*nigarish-i īrānīān bih dīn*) survey from June 6 to 21, 2020. This survey was conducted online using a specialized and secure platform.
- The sampling methods were multiple chain-referral sampling (or multiple virtual snowball sampling) through social media (Telegram, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook). More than 50,000 respondents living inside and outside Iran participated in the study (see the Appendix for more information on methods).
- According to Iran’s [official statistics](#) published in August 2020, 78 million people (94% of the total population) use the Internet, among whom 69 million are mobile Internet subscribers. On the other hand, [as reported by the Iranian Students Polling Agency](#) (ISPA) in March 2020, roughly 70% of Iranians use at least one social media platform. It is therefore possible to reach a substantial percentage of Iranians through the Internet and ask about their views.
- The survey comprised 11 questions about religiosity and politics as well as 8 general and demographic questions (sex, age group, level of education, province, urban/rural region, employment status, income level, and voting behavior).
- Respondents took part in the survey anonymously, feeling safer to express their real opinions than in telephone surveys or surveys conducted at respondents’ residence.
- Approximately 90% of the respondents reported that they live in Iran. Multiple verification methods showed that around 1%, either intentionally or unintentionally, reported false information about being inside or outside Iran.
- Iranians living inside Iran who responded to the survey were from all provinces and from both urban and rural areas. The sample characteristics can be found in the Appendix.

1.2. Preparing the refined sample

- One survey question was designed to detect random responses and bot submissions. The forms with a wrong response to this question and forms with contradictory answers were excluded from the sample (for example, those who declared that they had not reached voting age in the 2017 presidential election but also chose their age as over 30, or those who declared that they live in Iran in one question but selected outside Iran in another question).

- Having taken into account the standard age groups as outlined in the 2016 Census report, the refined sample included only respondents above 19 years old who lived in Iran.
- The refined sample size for respondents inside Iran was 39,981 respondents. All results in this report are extracted from this refined sample.
- The target population consisted of literate Iranian residents above 19 years old (who were capable of using the Internet and reading the survey questions). As reported by the 2016 National Population and Housing Census, around 47 million Iranians are literate and above 19 years old. This accounts for 85% of the adult population of Iran.
- In this report, the term “sample” refers exclusively to the refined sample, not the original raw sample. The term “population” refers only to the “target population,” not the overall population of Iran.
- Samples obtained from online surveys generally do not properly overlap with the target population’s characteristics. Weighting is used to obtain a representative sample. This technique balances the sample in accordance with characteristics of the target population in question. The results were also verified through the sample matching method. The Appendix discusses the employed sample balancing and weighting methods, as well as the characteristics of the sample demography and the target population.

Section 2: Main findings

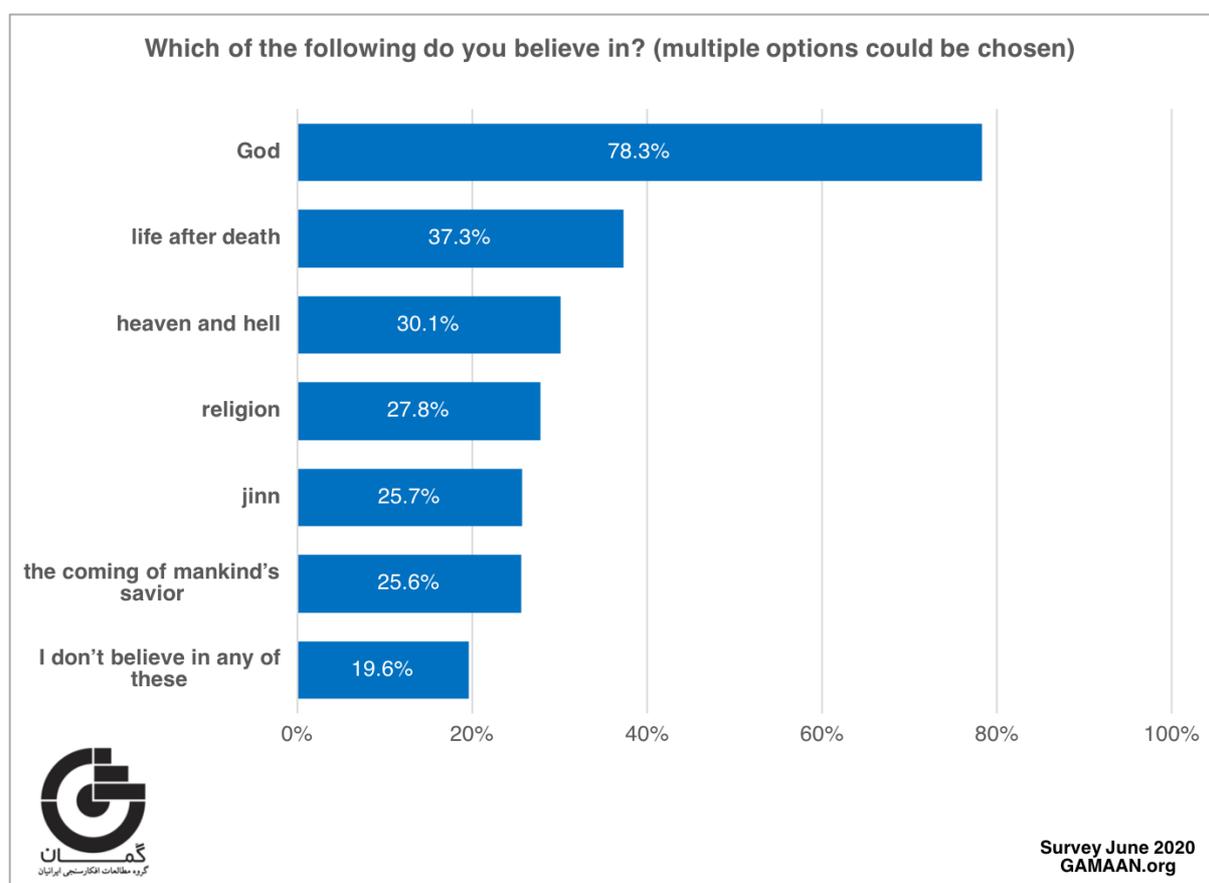
All results and tables presented here are based on the “weighted sample” extracted from respondents inside Iran. The findings can be generalized to the whole population of literate Iranian residents above 19 years old, who account for 85% of the total adult population of Iran, with the respective [credibility intervals](#) and credibility level of 5% and 95% (which replace the *margin of error* and the *confidence level* in online non-probability surveys).

2.1. Beliefs

This survey examined respondents’ belief in “God,” “heaven and hell,” “religion” (*dīn va mazhab*), “the coming of mankind’s savior” (*zuhūr-i munjī-i basharīyyat*), “life after death,” and “jinn.”

Figure 1 shows that 78% of Iranians believe in God; 37% believe in life after death; 30% believe in heaven and hell; 28% believe in the concept of “religion” (explained as *dīn va mazhab*); 26% believe in the existence of jinns; 26% believe in the coming of a savior, and 20% do not believe in any of the above.

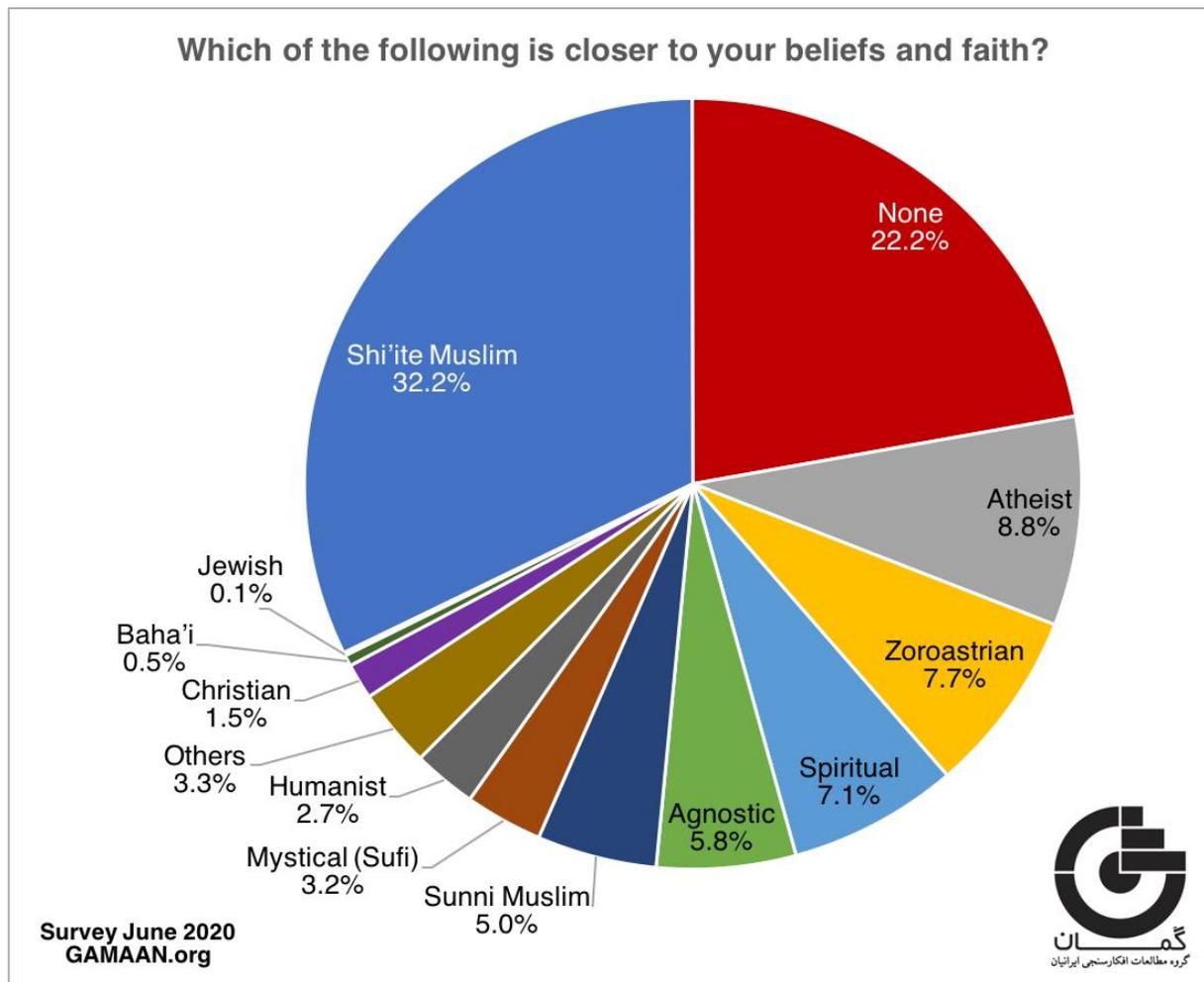
Figure 1



2.2. Religious diversity

Respondents were asked about their religious beliefs and faith (*bāvar va i'tiqād*). Figure 2 shows that while approximately one-third identifies as Shi'ite Muslim, a significant percentage of the population identifies with atheism (*āti'ist, khudānābāvar*), Zoroastrianism, spirituality (*ma'naviyyat'girā*), Sunni Islam, Sufi mysticism (*'irfān'girā, taṣavuf*), Christianity, and so on; 22% of the population said they belong to “none” (separate from atheism or agnosticism).

Figure 2



2.3. Changes in religiosity

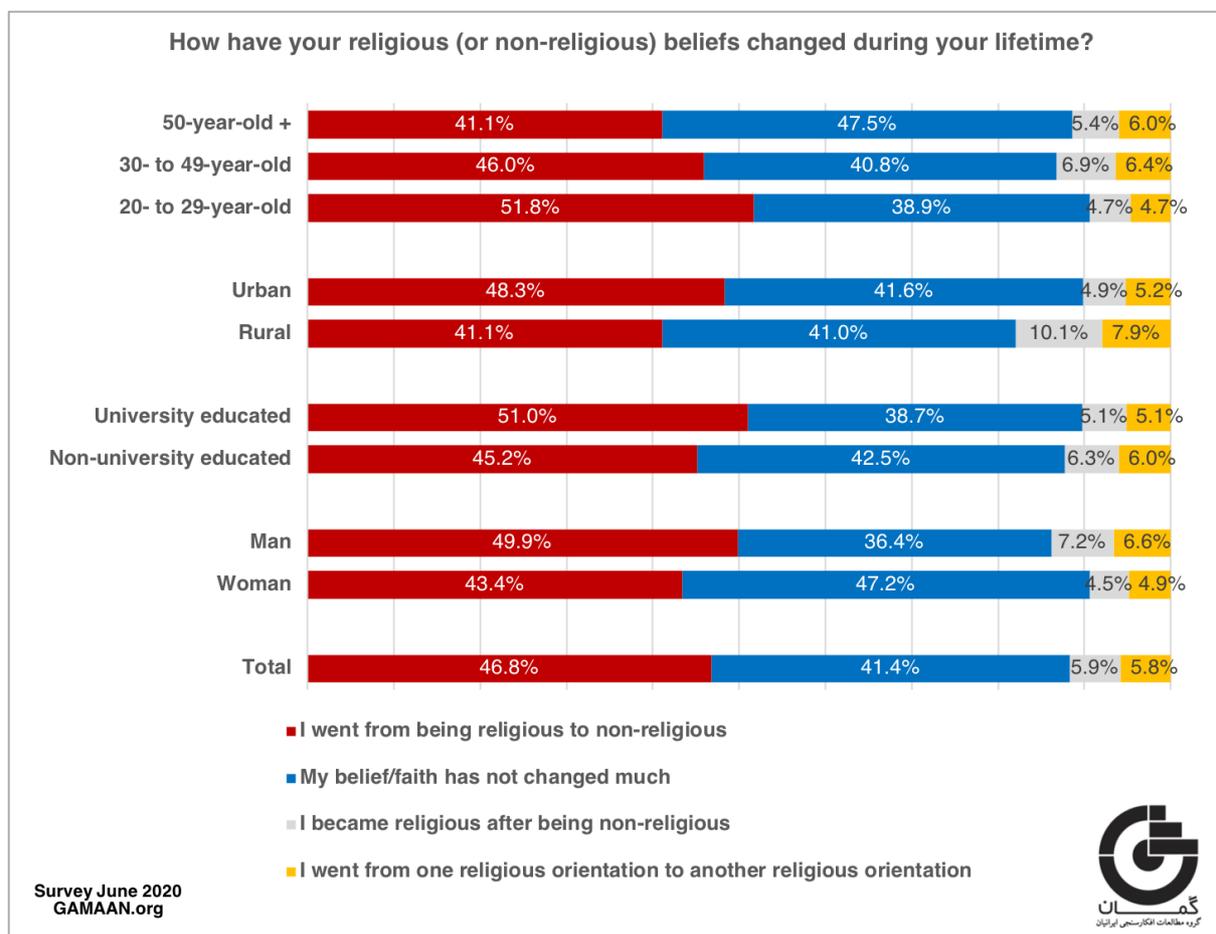
Respondents were asked about the changes in their religious or non-religious beliefs (*bāvar-i dīnī yā bī'dīnī*) during their lifetime. Figure 3 shows that 47% of the population reported having transitioned from being religious to non-religious (*az dīn'dārī bih bī'dīnī risīdah'am*). Additionally, 41% reported that their beliefs (*bāvar-i man*) did not change significantly throughout their lifetime. While 6% declared that they had become

religious after being non-religious, approximately the same percentage reported that they converted from one religious orientation (*girāyish-i dīnī*) to another.

The results also show that the transition from being religious to non-religious is more common among urban, educated, and younger groups. Men were more likely to change their religious orientation.

The survey results (not published here in a figure) also reveal that the majority of atheists and agnostics converted from being religious to non-religious. A significant number of converts to Christianity, Sufism, 'irfān-i halqah mysticism, and Buddhism converted from a different religious orientation.

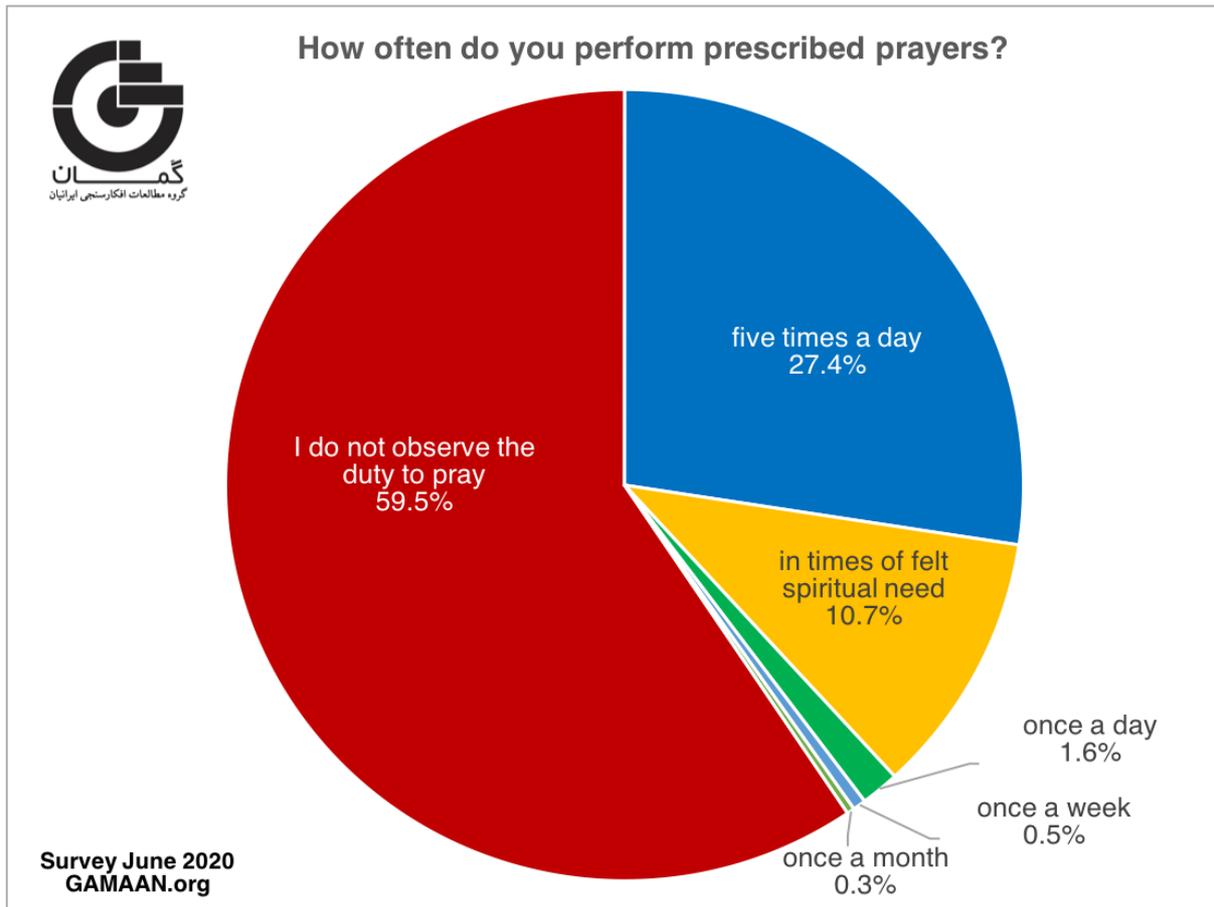
Figure 3



2.4. Prescribed prayers

In response to the question, “How often do you observe the duty to pray [*namāz*],” almost 60% reported that they do not pray (Figure 4). Around 40% reported performing prescribed prayers; they differed among themselves as to the frequency of prayer; over 27% reported that they pray five times a day.

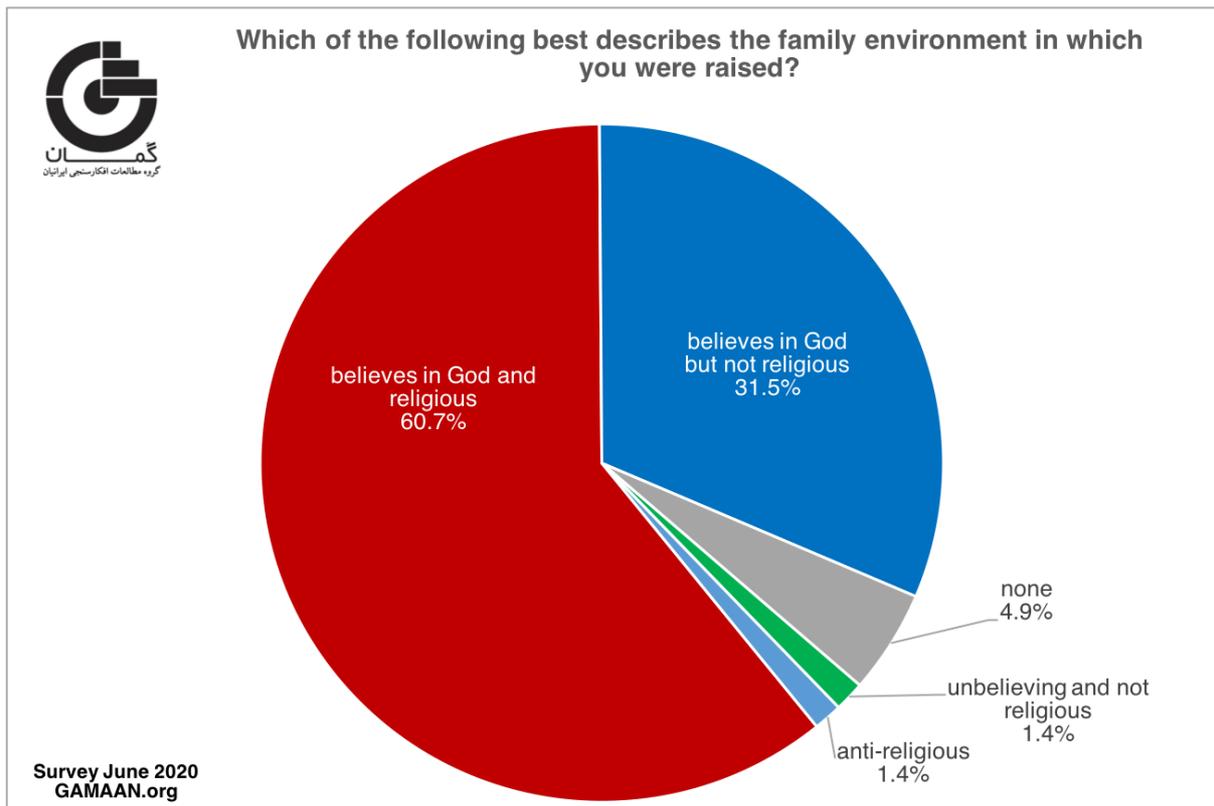
Figure 4



2.5 Belief and religion in family environments

While about 61% of the respondents reported having been raised in a family environment that “believes in God and is religious” (*khudā‘bāvar va maz‘habī*), 32% said that a more accurate description of their family environment would be “believes in God but not religious” (*khudā‘bāvar ammā ghayr-i‘mazhabī*). Less than 3% of the population said they had been raised in “unbelieving” or “anti-religious” families (Figure 5).

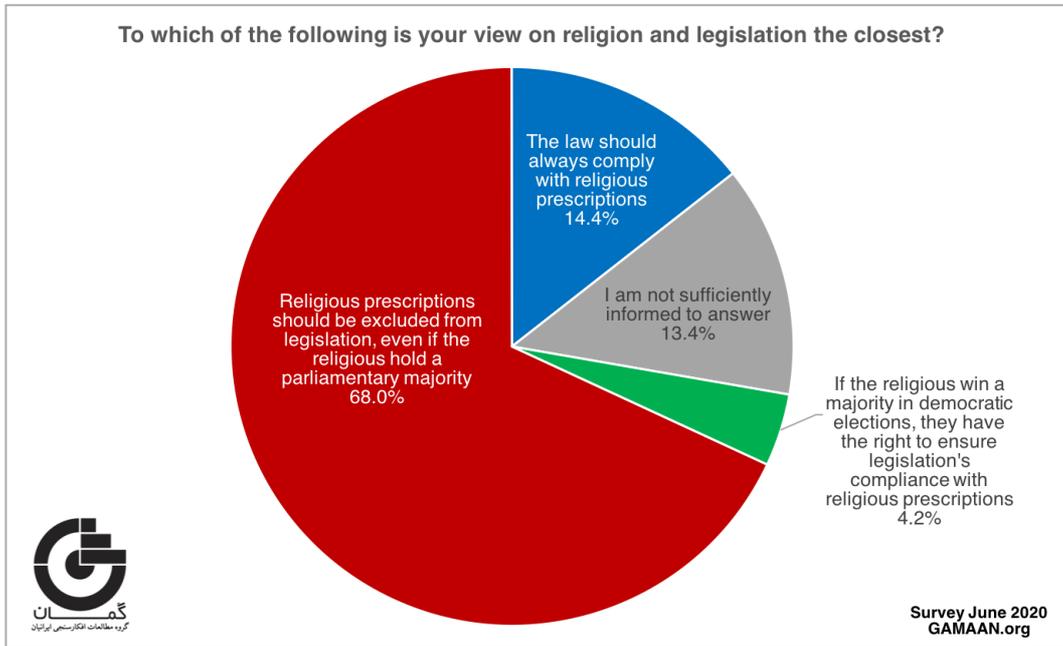
Figure 5



2.6 Religion and government

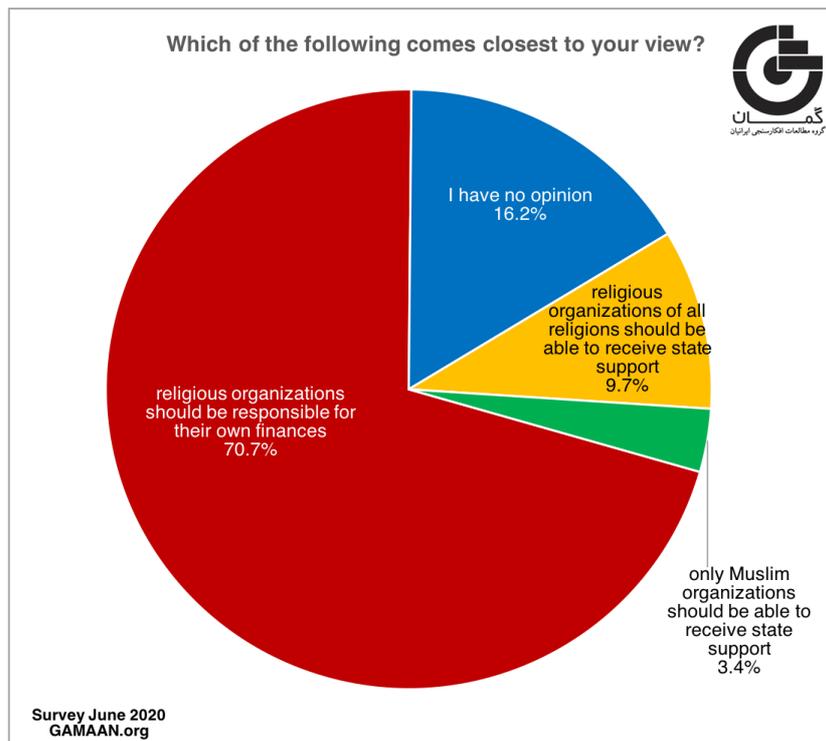
Figure 6 shows that the majority of the population, 68%, believes that religious prescriptions (*aḥkām-i dīnī*) should be excluded from legislation (*qānūn‘guzārī*), even if believers (*dīn‘dārān*) hold a parliamentary majority. Over 14% of the population believes that the law should always comply with religious prescriptions. Around 4% of the population holds that believers are entitled to pass laws based on religious prescriptions if they win a parliamentary majority in a democratic election. Also, 13% declared that they were insufficiently informed to answer this question.

Figure 6



In response to another question concerning religion and government (Figure 7), 71% of the population maintained that religious institutions should be responsible for their own finances (*hazīnah'hāyishān*). On the other hand, 10% of the population thinks that all religious organizations, irrespective of their faith, should receive government support (*kumak'hāy-i dawlatī*), while 3% hold the view that only Islamic organizations are entitled to such benefits.

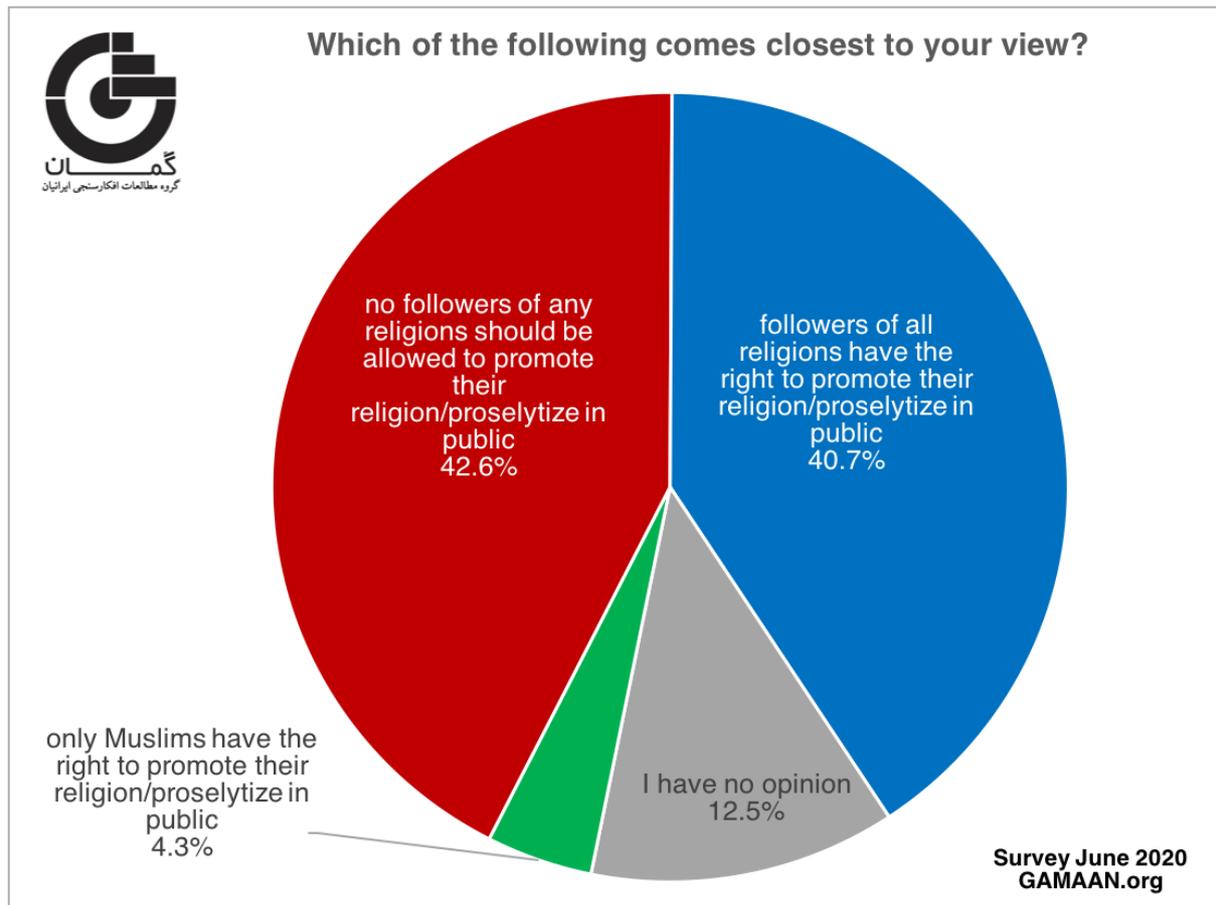
Figure 7



2.7 Public proselytizing

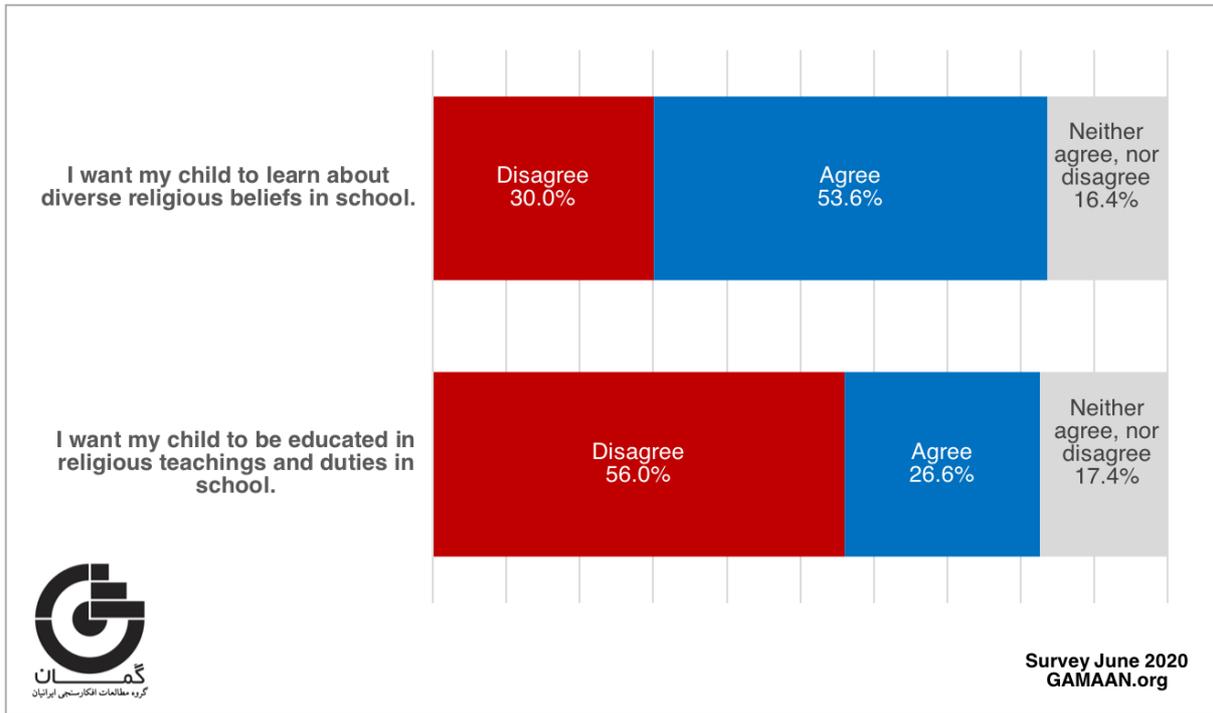
Figure 8 shows that 41% of the population think that all religions' supporters should have the right to publicly proselytize or promote their religion (*dīn'ishān rā dar 'arṣah'i 'umūmī tablīgh kunand*), while 4% are of the opinion that this right should be reserved exclusively to Muslims. Approximately 43% of the population thinks that no religion should have a right to proselytize in public.

Figure 8



In response to a question about schools, 56% expressed that they did not want their children receiving religious education and instruction (*ta'ālīm va takālīf-i dīnī*) (Figure 9). Around 54%, however, would like their children to learn about different faiths (*bāvarhāy-i adyān-i mukhtalīf*) at school.

Figure 9



2.8 The hijab

The majority of the population, 72%, opposes the legal obligation to wear the hijab or Islamic veil in public, while 15% explicitly defend the policy. On the other hand, 57% reports not believing in the practice of wearing the hijab altogether (Figure 10). Half of the population that believes in wearing the hijab (*bih hijāb i'tiqād dāram*) agrees with the compulsory hijab (Figure 11).

Figure 10

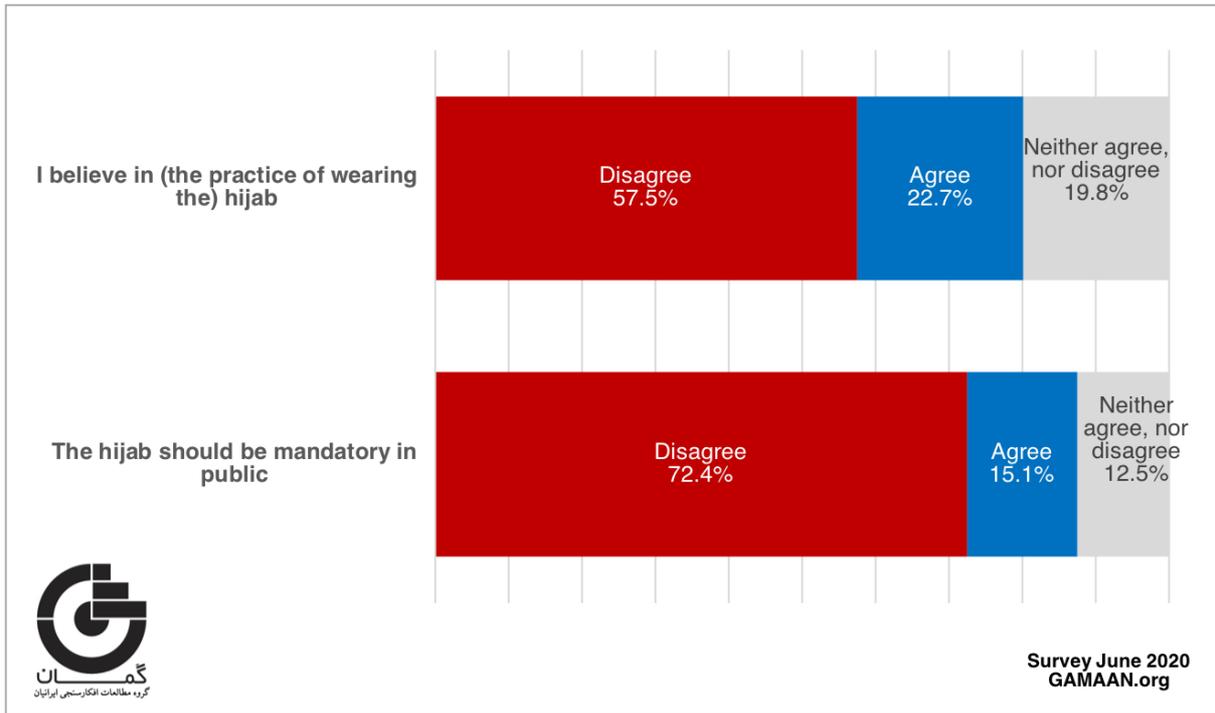
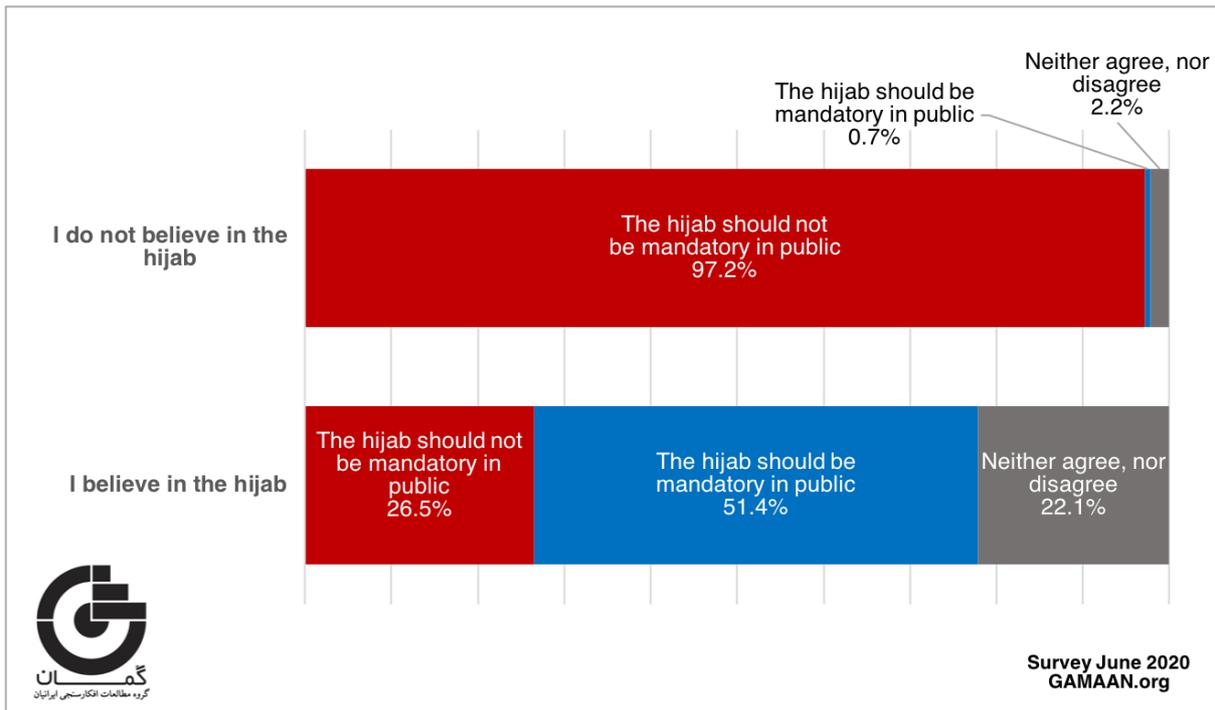


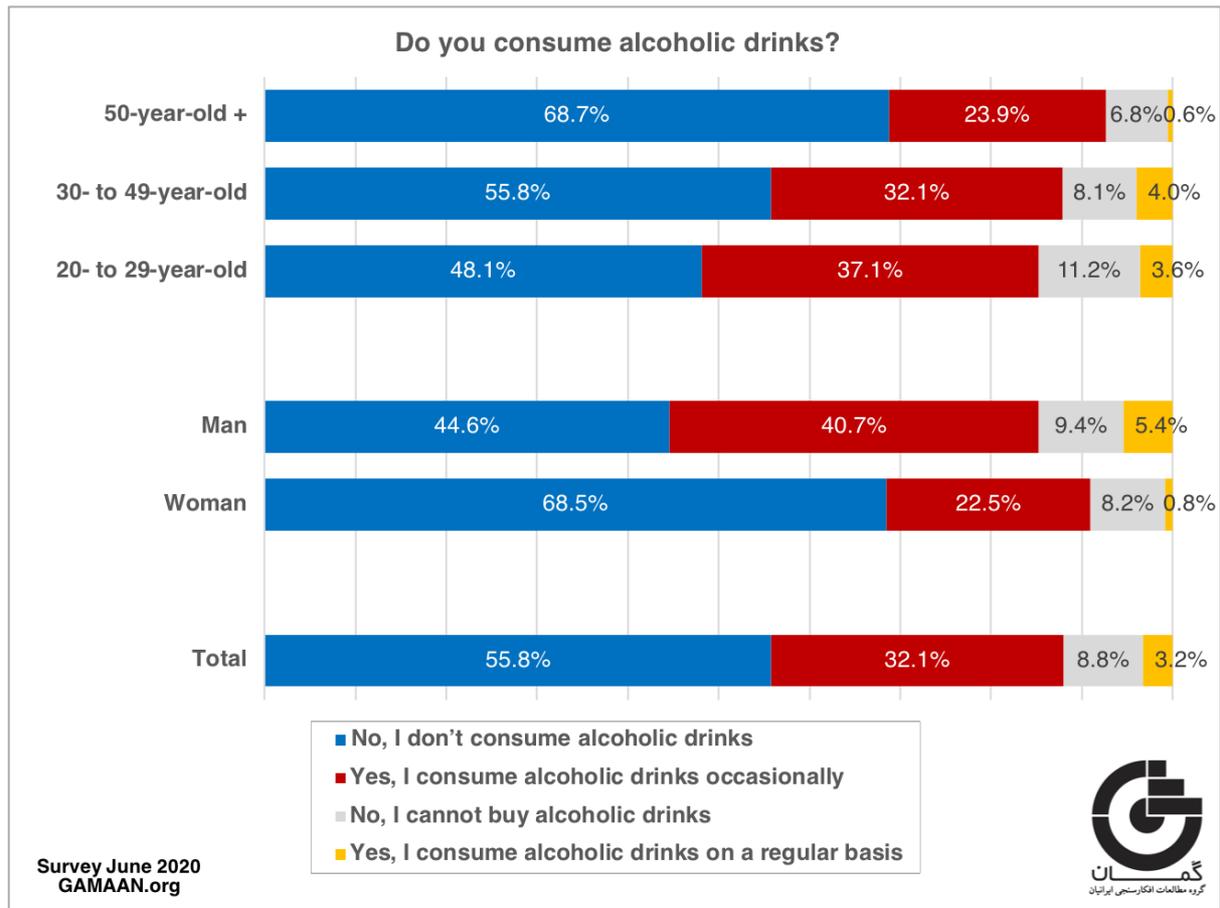
Figure 11



2.9 Alcohol consumption

In response to a question regarding alcohol consumption, 56% reported that they do not drink. More than one-third of the population, however, stated that they drink either occasionally or regularly. Almost 9% of the population does not drink because they are not able to purchase alcohol (because of either inaccessibility or high price). The results in Figure 12 show that drinking is more common among younger men.

Figure 12



Appendix: Methodology

Sampling method

This study aimed to measure and document attitudes and opinions in a closed society, which cannot be obtained using conventional methods. Studies employing opt-in online surveys face methodical challenges that are inherent to online sampling methods, which are nevertheless becoming the norm. These shortcomings include the so-called network effect, which means that the survey is more likely to reach respondents who hold beliefs similar to those held by the organizers, as well as self-selection, which means that those with a special interest in the survey topic are more likely to participate.

To reduce these effects, the survey was spread through individuals as well as social media groups, channels, and pages representing radically diverse social layers of society and political perspectives. Using multiple chain-referral sampling to reach a diverse audience, the online survey was shared by platforms belonging to specific groups, such as ethnic and religious minorities and pro-regime Shi'ite networks, as well as a mass audience consuming social, political, and entertainment contents. The targeted Instagram pages and Telegram channels ranged between 10 and 100 thousand followers, while those with a general audience ranged up to 1 or several million followers. These measures also increased the sample size, further minimizing bias.

In response to one of the survey questions, fewer than 10% of respondents said they had participated in GAMAAN's previous surveys. This is a promising indication that the survey circulation strategy among diverse groups has reached individuals outside GAMAAN researchers' social circles.

Balancing and weighting methods

Two weighting methods, raking and cell weighting, were employed to generate a representative sample from the refined sample. As [a study conducted by the PEW Research Center](#) shows, these weighting methods are among the most effective and reliable for samples derived from online surveys. As suggested by PEW, a variable reflecting respondents' political orientation was introduced in the survey and used for weighting. This decreases the sampling bias while increasing generalizability. Sample balancing and weighting were carried out in cooperation with and using the tools of the Dutch company, [Spinnaker Research](#).

To obtain a representative sample, the refined sample drawn from respondents living inside Iran was weighted based on sex, age group, level of education, province, urban/rural areas, and respondents' voting behavior in the 2017 presidential election.

The data from the Islamic Republic of Iran’s reports, [Selected Findings of the 2016 National Population and Housing Census](#) and [A Selection of Labor Force Survey Results – Spring 2020](#)), were used to extract the target population characteristics. Having run the weighting computations based on interlocking variables, an effective sample size of 1,911 was estimated. This sample size is more than appropriate, given the respective [credibility intervals and credibility level](#) of 5% and 95% (which replace the *margin of error* and the *confidence level* in online non-probability surveys).

Weighting results

The target population of this survey is literate Iranian residents above 19 years old. As the data from the 2016 National Population and Housing Census shows, this population accounts for 47 million Iranians, who comprise 85% of the adult population of Iran.

Tables 1 to 6 compare the demographic variables of the refined sample and the target population. The demographic characteristics of the weighted sample are consistent with those of the target population.

Table 1: Sex Distribution

Sex	Refined sample	Weighted sample	Population of literate individuals above 19 years old (from the 2016 Census)
Female	31.9%	47%	47%
Male	68.1%	53%	53%

Table 2: Age Group Distribution

Age groups	Refined sample	Weighted sample	Population of literate individuals above 19 years old (from the 2016 Census)
Between 20 and 29 years old	28.4%	30.4%	30.1%
Between 30 and 49 years old	61.0%	51.4%	51.1%
At least 50 years old	10.6%	18.2%	18.8%

Table 3: Education Level Distribution

Level of education	Refined sample	Weighted sample	Population of literate individuals above 19 years old (from the 2016 Census)
High school diploma and lower degrees	14.6%	72%	72.3%
Higher education degree	85.4%	28%	27.7%

Table 4: Urban/Rural Distribution

Region	Refined sample	Weighted sample	Population of literate individuals above 19 years old (from the 2016 Census)
Rural Areas	3.5%	20.4%	21.2%
Urban Areas	96.5%	79.6%	78.8%

Table 5: Province Distribution

Province of Residence	Refined sample	Weighted sample	Population of literate individuals above 19 years old (from the 2016 Census)
East Azerbaijan	2.5%	4.8%	4.8%
West Azerbaijan	1.8%	3.6%	3.6%
Ardabil	0.5%	1.5%	1.5%
Isfahan	6.1%	6.9%	6.9%
Alborz	4.8%	3.8%	3.8%
Ilam	0.4%	0.7%	0.7%
Bushehr	0.9%	1.5%	1.5%
Tehran	40.7%	19.1%	19.1%
Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari	0.5%	1.1%	1.1%
South Khorasan	0.4%	0.9%	0.9%
Razavi Khorasan	7.6%	7.8%	7.8%
North Khorasan	0.6%	0.9%	0.9%
Khuzestan	3.2%	5.4%	5.4%
Zanjan	0.8%	1.3%	1.3%
Semnan	0.7%	1.0%	1.0%
Sistan and Baluchistan	1.1%	2.1%	2.1%
Fars	5.4%	6.3%	6.3%
Ghazvin	1.2%	1.6%	1.6%
Qom	1.5%	1.6%	1.6%
Kurdistan	2.0%	1.8%	1.8%
Kerman	1.5%	3.6%	3.6%
Kermanshah	1.7%	2.4%	2.4%
Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad	0.4%	0.8%	0.8%
Golestan	1.0%	2.2%	2.2%
Gilan	3.4%	3.5%	3.5%
Lorestan	1.0%	2.0%	2.0%
Mazandaran	3.6%	4.5%	4.5%
Markazi	1.2%	1.8%	1.8%
Hormozgan	1.2%	2.0%	2.0%
Hamadan	1.1%	2.1%	2.1%
Yazd	1.1%	1.4%	1.4%

Apart from demographic variables, respondents' voting behavior in the 2017 Iranian presidential election was also used for sample weighting (considering that this election's results were not controversial and the reliability of the final, formally declared numbers). The computations were run based on interlocking variables, using [the results of an electoral survey](#) conducted a few days before the 2017 presidential

election. Although a smaller number of Ebrahim Raisi voters participated in our survey, their number in the refined sample was still significantly high, facilitating generalizability to the target population through weighting.

Table 6: Political Voting Behavior Distribution

Voted for candidate in the 2017 presidential election	Refined sample	Weighted sample	Official results of the 2017 presidential election
Hassan Rouhani (+ Hashemitaba)	62.6%	44.5%	42.2%
Ebrahim Raisi (+ Mir-Salim)	4.0%	26.2%	28.8%
I did not vote (+ I cast a blank vote)	33.4%	29.3%	29.0%

Reliability check

One of the methods for examining the reliability and generalizability of a weighted sample is to compare the results from the weighted sample against external evidence. Table 7 compares the status of economic activity (percentage of employed individuals) in the weighted sample with that of the target population on both urban and rural levels. While the weighted sample includes only literate individuals above 19 years old, the statistic of those formally employed reflects both literate and illiterate populations of the labor force. As reported in [A Selection of Labor Force Survey Results \(Spring 2020\)](#), in urban areas, the employment rate of literate people is higher than that of the illiterate and barely literate population. As can be seen, the employment rate of the weighted sample is sufficiently consistent with that of the target population.

Table 7: Comparison of Employment Rate Distribution with External Evidence

Employment status	Whole country		Urban areas		Rural areas	
	Weighted sample – literate Individuals above 19 years old	Workforce statistics – individuals above 19 years old (Spring 2020)	Weighted sample – literate individuals above 19 years old	Workforce statistics – individuals above 19 years old (Spring 2020)	Weighted sample – literate individuals above 19 years old	Workforce statistics for individuals above 19 years old (Spring 2020)
Employed	45.1%	40.0%	47.3%	39.0%	36.6%	41.0%

Moreover, to estimate the reliability of the results drawn from the weighted sample, computations were run once again using the [matching method](#), and the results were compared against the original results. First, a random sample including 2,000 respondents was extracted from the refined sample of 39,981 respondents. This sample was extracted so that it complied with the six demographic and political variables of the target population – namely sex, age group, education level, province, urban or rural region, and voting behavior. Having carried out a comparative analysis, the results obtained from this new sample were consistent with those obtained from the weighted sample, with a relative difference of about 1%.

On balance, the weighted sample adequately represents the target population (literate individuals above 19 years old) and the results obtained can be generalized to a substantial majority of the Iranian population (that is, 85% of the adult population) with the aforementioned credibility intervals.

* * *

We at the non-profit research foundation GAMAAN would like to express our sincere gratitude to all of those who took their time to contribute to this survey.

GAMAAN commits itself to ethical guidelines with regard to protecting respondents' submitted data. We are professionally committed to sparing no effort in collecting the opinions and attitudes of Iranians from all levels of society and all walks of life.

GAMAAN strives to employ scientific methods in extracting representative samples. We pledge to be transparent to the public and in explaining probable error levels.

Our team gladly receives any comments, suggestions, and criticisms at info@gamaan.org. We are also open to cooperate with research centers and academic institutions based on our Articles of Association.