

Arab Opinion Reflects Regional Changes

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The Arab World has seen a significant juggling of relationships. After the debacle of Iraq and 20 years of dizzying, often incoherent shifts in American policy, the US is no longer the sole dominant player. Russia and China have entered the region's calculus as global powers of influence. And Iran, Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and UAE have emerged as local powers.

The region faces a number of unsettling challenges, particularly: De-stabilisation from several internal conflicts, threats from Iran's sectarian meddling, and Israel's brutality and acquisitiveness in occupied Palestinian lands.

With the US doing little to calm these troubled waters, or actually roiling them, Arab countries have had to establish their own paths forward to protect or project their interests.

In 2020, to forestall a potentially imminent Israeli formal annexation of much of the Palestinian territories, the UAE launched the Abrahamic Accords. Other countries have since joined. Meanwhile, several Arab countries have met with and begun opening up to Iraq and normalising relations with Syria. While Israel and some US hawks thought Arab ties with Israel would establish a regional bloc against Iran, the UAE and now Saudi Arabia, with help from China, have moved toward normalising ties with Iran.

These regional shifts and independent Arab initiatives have caught the US off-guard. Its outmoded playbook stars Israel as the region's center of gravity, and Iran and Syria as pariahs to be shunned and confronted. Following Russia's aggression against Ukraine, and China's emergence as a threat to US global hegemony, the US has resurrected the Cold War's cry of 'democracy versus authoritarianism.'

To assess Arab views of these developments, Zogby Research Services has, in recent years, conducted polls in over a dozen Arab countries. Here's what we've found:

Long alienated by the U.S. and its policies and despite blaming Russia for Ukraine, Arabs

don't want their governments becoming involved or following the US. They view the conflict as a European/US matter.

In most Arab countries China is seen as the emerging power. Acknowledging that today the US is more powerful, they see the gap closing in the next decade. In 20 years, majorities in every country see China emerging as the world's power.

Important, but often overlooked by US policymakers, is that Arabs see America's strong suit in competition with China as its "soft power", cultural values and education. Arabs like the US and its values but feel the US doesn't care about them.

Looking inward, Arabs in most countries rate Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE highest in favorability, regional role, and the importance of ties. Iran and Israel are seen as regional threats, with Israel seen as a greater threat than Iran in all countries except the UAE, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia, where Iran is slightly more threatening than Israel.

Notably, of all five Arab countries with peace agreements with Israel, only the UAE has warming attitudes, while favorability remains quite low in Egypt, Jordan, Bahrain and Morocco. Despite the overwhelming Saudi majority who report negative attitudes toward Israel, a sizable minority says ties might still be beneficial.

Palestinians and Palestinian citizens of Israel have consistently favourable views toward the major Arab countries (UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt) playing a role in their region, and negative views toward Iran. Palestinian respondents also display mixed views toward the Abrahamic Accords and its impact, with Palestinian citizens of Israel and Palestinians of East Jerusalem more favorably inclined toward the Accords than Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza. Among Palestinian citizens of Israel, a substantial majority say the Accords have either had a positive impact on their lives or could in the future.

These findings point to the clear reality that Arab opinion is mostly aligned with changes occurring across the region. Arabs no longer see the US as the only player in town. They are uninterested in following the US lead and a growing respect for China. With strong negatives for Iran and Israel, Arabs recognise a new regional dynamic unfolding requiring Arabs to define their own paths forward.

Other findings suggest that Iran and Israel should understand that current moves toward regional integration will only continue to grow if behaviours change, with Iran ending its meddlesome regional role and Israel advancing Palestinian justice and rights.

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