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A Hidden Force in the Middle East

How Arab Public Opinion Constrains Normalization With Israel

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When Israel began to normalize relations with some of its neighbors in 2020, as part of the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords, many analysts began to wonder whether the Palestinian cause still mattered to the Arab world. Doubts about the salience of the issue for Arabs grew in late 2023, when it appeared that Saudi Arabia might also join the accords, normalizing relations with Israel without demanding, in exchange, the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.

The Israeli military campaign in Gaza that followed Hamas's attack against Israel on October 7, 2023, provoked international outrage at the scale of violence used against Palestinian civilians and Israel's blockade of humanitarian assistance to Gaza. Palestinians in Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel have long endured violence and deprivation, but Arab opposition to the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories has rarely been a decisive factor in the conflict. Considering the unprecedented level of devastation this round of fighting has wreaked, many observers anticipated that anger among ordinary citizens in Arab states might lead to significant shifts in their governments' rhetoric and policy.

Instead, some scholars have argued that the October 7 attacks and the events that followed have in fact weakened the Palestinian cause, noting that the issue has largely fallen off the international agenda. Some cite, for example, the fact that none of the Arab countries that signed peace treaties with Israel have broken those relations. Similarly, during U.S. President Donald Trump's recent trip to Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United

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seemed like a proverbial “dog that did not bark.”

This view, however, misses a crucial reality. As our opinion polling in the region demonstrates, Arab public opinion has indeed shifted—and in ways that have influenced the conduct of regimes in Arab countries. Although their core interests have not meaningfully changed as a result of the conflict in Gaza, their foreign policies have been constrained by their citizens’ intensifying anger about Israeli offensives. After Israel began its campaign in Gaza, Arab-Israeli normalization was brought to a halt. And during Trump’s recent visit to Saudi Arabia, the expansion of the Abraham Accords was not on the agenda. Despite October 7 and the Gaza war, some Arab governments still hoped for closer ties with Israel, believing such relations would serve their strategic interests. But they have not been able to move forward because of public opposition. The lack of progress on that agenda is the true “dog that did not bark.”

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Today, unlike in the days before October 7, regional leaders cannot simply ignore their populations’ support for the Palestinian cause. If Israel is to make meaningful progress on its integration into the region, some path to Palestinian statehood will have to be on the table.

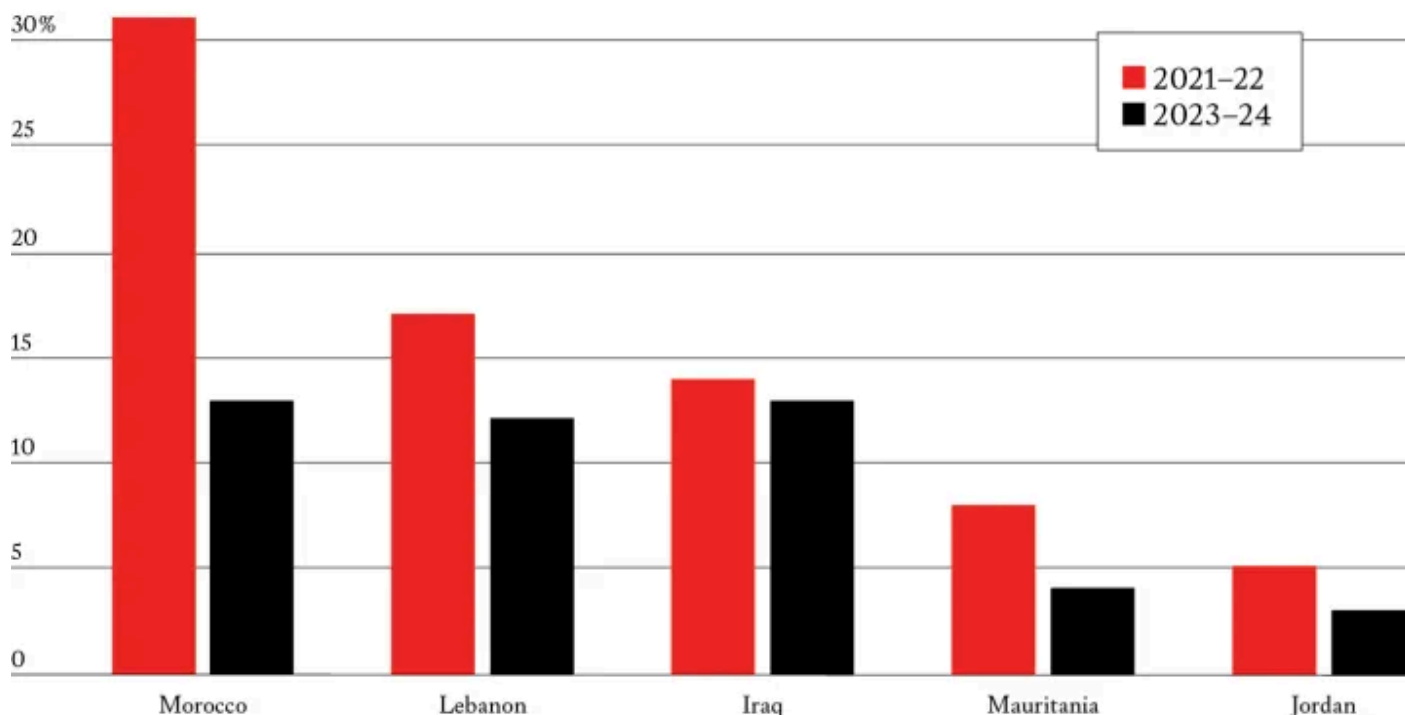
PUBLIC PRIORITIES

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that commitment deepened. During that period, our organization, Arab Barometer, conducted nationally representative surveys across the region. We found that from Morocco to Kuwait, a clear majority of survey respondents described Israel's assault on Gaza using the terms "genocide," "massacre," or "ethnic cleansing." Still, most respondents recognized Israel's right to exist: even after Israel responded with military force to the October 7 attacks, a majority in nearly all the countries surveyed favored a two-state solution for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But hostility toward Israel remained prevalent: just three percent of Tunisians, for example, reported holding a "very favorable" or "somewhat favorable" opinion of Israel. Support for normalization with Israel also fell, including in countries that had already signed the Abraham Accords. In Morocco, which normalized relations with Israel through the accords in 2020, just 13 percent of respondents favored the normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel in the months after October 7, compared with 31 percent in 2022.

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Percent of respondents who favor or strongly favor normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel



Source: Arab Barometer.

Arab citizens' opinions of international actors have also shifted as a result of the war in Gaza. In most countries surveyed across the region, people reported substantially lower favorability toward the United States in the surveys conducted after October 7, compared with those conducted from 2021 to 2022, including declines of 23 percentage points in Jordan, 19 points in Mauritania, 15 points in Lebanon, and seven points in Iraq. Similar drops have occurred with respect to other Israeli allies, such as France and the United Kingdom. Favorability toward France dropped 20 percentage points in Lebanon, 17 points in Mauritania, and ten points in Morocco. The same was true of positive views toward the United Kingdom, which declined by 38 percentage points in Morocco, 11 points in Jordan, and five points in Iraq. Meanwhile, during the same period, views of China improved dramatically, reversing a years-long decline. China's

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These dramatic changes in public opinion have not been accompanied by upheavals of the kind the region witnessed, for example, during the Arab Spring revolts of 2010–11. But protests have been relatively common across the Arab region over the past year and a half. In Arab Barometer surveys conducted from 2023 to 2024, at least ten percent of adult respondents in every country surveyed reported having taken part in a demonstration in the past year—a proportion comparable to that of adult Americans who took part in protests against police brutality during the spring and summer of 2020, according to polls conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation and Civis Analytics. As recently as April and May of this year, local protests related to Gaza have taken place in Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen. In Morocco, there were 110 demonstrations across 66 cities and towns in just a single day in April. And this week, a large grassroots convoy known as the Somoud and made up of Tunisians, Libyans, and individuals from a variety of other countries reached Libya, from its starting point in Tunis, on a mission to deliver aid to those in Gaza. The convoy expects to gain participants as it continues on toward Gaza. These events, however, have received relatively little attention from international media outlets.

Demonstrations would likely have been larger and involved broader segments of Arab societies—and more visible to outside observers—if not for the repressive practices of the governments in the region. Protests are not officially banned in most Arab countries, but most citizens understand that in practice, they do not have a guaranteed right to participate in demonstrations that express opposition to their governments' policies. Across 11 countries surveyed by Arab Barometer between 2021 and 2022, only 36 percent of respondents on average agreed that freedom to participate in peaceful protests and demonstrations is guaranteed to a “great or medium extent.” Tunisia was the only country where a clear majority of respondents—61 percent—agreed; only 25 percent of respondents in Jordan and 12 percent in Egypt answered the same. In the years since those polls were conducted, governments in the region have given people little reason to think they have become more open to dissent.

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In Jordan, which has a peace treaty with Israel, protests against the Israeli campaign in Gaza began taking place nearly every day after October 7, with large-scale demonstrations following Friday prayers every week. After similar protests broke out around the Israeli embassy in Amman, Israel evacuated its ambassador, and it has not since replaced its diplomatic mission in Jordan. In November 2023, the Jordanian government recalled its own ambassador to Israel in response to public pressure. Jordan has, in some cases, continued its engagement with Israel. In response to Iran's missile and drone attack on Israel in April 2024, for example, Jordan quietly assisted the U.S.-led defense of Israel. This support led to large public protests in Jordan, and in April of this year, the Jordanian government began to enforce a ban on the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist group with a long history of organizing demonstrations against Israel and in support of the Palestinian cause—and disbanded the organization. As a result of the crackdown, during the past two months, regular protests in support of Gaza have become far less common.

In Morocco, too, the regime has been wary of those who criticize the country's ties with Israel, which were formalized in 2020 as part of the Abraham Accords. The government has routinely jailed protesters demanding that Morocco break the agreement. But the protest movement has not ended. Instead, demonstrators have changed their tactics, including moving from urban centers to the country's ports. Over the past few months, protesters have been targeting ships docked in Morocco that are on their way to Israel to support the Israeli war effort. In April 2025, Morocco's largest labor union called for the government to ban such ships from Moroccan waters and facilitated a round of protests in support of Gaza.

Meanwhile, in Kuwait, the government has sought to prevent pro-Palestinian demonstrations in by banning such public protests. Kuwaitis have nevertheless found ways to show their support for the people of Gaza. The results of an Arab Barometer survey conducted in March 2024 indicated that 84 percent of respondents had boycotted companies that support Israel, 62 percent had made donations to support Gazans, 40

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NO GOING BACK

Although Arab governments have criticized Israel's conduct in Gaza, they have refrained from taking any steps that would make it harder for Israel to continue its military operations there. But this is not because citizens have moved on or because leaders can simply ignore such currents of opinion. Protests are happening every day across the region, and even if they are not driving sharp policy reversals by autocratic governments, they are constraining those governments' policy options. Before October 7, Saudi Arabia appeared to be close to normalizing ties with Israel, even without any path toward Palestinian independence in sight. In February 2025, by contrast, the Saudi Foreign Ministry released a statement of "firm and unwavering" support for establishing a Palestinian state, a position it described as "non-negotiable and not subject to compromises," and stated that an independent Palestine with Jerusalem as its capital is a precondition for diplomatic relations with Israel. In March, Egypt released a proposal to rebuild Gaza that was based on an Arab-led reconstruction of and establishment of future security oversight for Gaza. The plan was unanimously approved by the Arab League and offered a stark contrast with Israeli and American visions of depopulating and seizing Gaza. It was intended in part to shore up public support for Arab governments, in response to their populations' demands that they take action. And despite Trump's goal of extending the Abraham Accords to other Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia and Lebanon, that initiative seems unlikely to bear fruit any time soon.

Arab leaders may be unwilling to challenge Israel directly, but they are also unwilling to confront the public backlash that would result from closer cooperation. Moves by Arab governments, such as Morocco's cancellation of a visit by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that had been planned for 2024, fall short of a dramatic split. But they have stunted Israel's integration into the region—a key goal of the Abraham Accords. Not only are Arab citizens turning out in support of the people of Gaza; their efforts are also changing regional dynamics in ways that challenge U.S. and Israeli interests. As long as Arab populations reject U.S. and Western policies toward Israel

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most likely escalate.



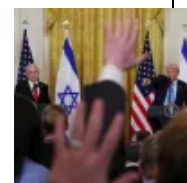
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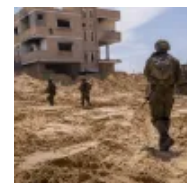
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