

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

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Resistance

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Since October 7, the latest onslaught between Hamas and Israel has claimed the lives of more than 15,000 Palestinians and over 1,200 Israelis. Scores more have been injured. The war has displaced more than 1.8 million Palestinians and left the fates of many of Israel's people unknown; over 100 of those abducted in Israel remain hostages. Fighting has resulted in damage to 15 percent of the buildings in Gaza, including over 100 cultural landmarks and more than 45 percent of all housing units.

As many analysts have already declared, the high costs in Gaza have reverberated around the Arab world, reaffirming the salience and power of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in shaping regional politics. Yet it has been

difficult to say exactly how much the attack has affected Arab attitudes—and in what particular ways.

Now, that is changing. In the weeks leading up to the attack and the three weeks that followed, our nonpartisan research firm, Arab Barometer, conducted a nationally representative survey in Tunisia in conjunction with our local partner, One to One for Research and Polling. By chance, about half the 2,406 interviews were completed in the three weeks before October 7, and the remaining half occurred in the three weeks after. As a result, a comparison of the results can show—with unusual precision—how the attack and subsequent Israeli military campaign have changed views among Arabs.

The findings are striking. U.S. President Joe Biden recently warned that Israel was losing global support over Gaza, but that is only the tip of the iceberg. Since October 7, every country in the survey with positive or warming relations with Israel saw its favorability ratings decline among Tunisians. The United States saw the steepest drop, but Washington's Middle East allies that have forged ties to Israel over the last few years also saw their approval numbers go down. States that have stayed neutral, meanwhile, experienced little shift. And the leadership of Iran, which is ardently opposed to Israel, saw its favorability figures rise. Three weeks after the attacks, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has approval ratings that matched or even exceeded those of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, known as MBS, and Emirati President Mohammed bin Zayed, known as MBZ.

Tunisia is but one country in the Middle East and North Africa, a region of vast differences, and this survey cannot tell experts everything about how people throughout the region think and feel. But Tunisia is about as close to a bellwether as one could imagine. In previous Arab Barometer surveys, Tunisians have had views similar to those found in most other Arab countries. The population is open to the West but is also open to other global powers, such as China and Russia. It is geographically removed from the immediate effects of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but it has a history of direct involvement, including once housing the Palestine Liberation Organization. Analysts and officials

can safely assume that people's views elsewhere in the region have shifted in ways similar to the recent changes that have taken place in Tunisia.

Those shifts have been dramatic: rarely are changes of this magnitude seen in the course of a few weeks. But that does not indicate knee-jerk reactions on the part of Tunisians. If Tunisia's people were changing their views simply because they supported Hamas's actions, a major shift would have occurred within a day of the attack and then Tunisians' opinions would have quickly stabilized. Instead, their opinions moved little by little on a daily basis over a three-week period, but significantly over the whole period. As a result, it is most likely that Tunisians' views shifted not in response to Hamas's attack but to the subsequent events, namely, the increasing cost to civilians of Israel's military operation in Gaza. Still, the war has certainly increased Tunisians' support for Palestinian fighting. Compared with surveys taken before the October 7 attack, far more Tunisians today want the Palestinians to resolve their conflict with Israel via force rather than with a peaceful settlement.

Public opinion matters even in nondemocracies, where leaders must worry about protests, and these shifting views will reshape politics in the Arab world—as well as around the globe. The United States and its regional allies will have great difficulty expanding the Abraham Accords, which normalized ties between several Arab states and Israel. Washington may also lose the advantage in its contest with a rising China and a resurgent Russia. The United States could even find that many long-standing allies such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates become less friendly toward the United States and more receptive toward its rivals as they seek to stave off their own regional declines. Since the attack, for example, both countries have welcomed Russian President Vladimir Putin for his first visit to the region since the invasion of Ukraine.

The growing support for armed resistance could also have dangerous consequences. The war against Hamas has not yet led to a wider conflict, but Israel has had to fend off strikes from Hezbollah in Lebanon, and the Middle East and North Africa overall are prone to instability. It is not hard to imagine how the current invasion could spiral or open the door to

a future conflict. To stabilize the region, Israel and its allies must, therefore, find a way to end this war and then pivot, quickly, to peacefully resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

ROCK BOTTOM

Arab Barometer, our academic research project, was in the process of conducting a wide-ranging issues survey with a random sample of Tunisia's residents when Hamas attacked Israel on October 7. We decided to use this timing to investigate how this event and the war that followed affected public opinion. Since we did not expect significant changes in the views of Tunisians before October 7, we first took the average opinion for the initial three weeks of fieldwork. We then looked at how public opinion changed in the weeks that followed. Since the sample size is relatively small on each given day of our post-October 7 analysis, we made our estimates of how people felt at any given time using three-day moving averages of public opinion. This means that each data point represents an estimate on the day of the survey and the two days prior. (Although the last day of fielding was November 4, October 27 was the last day enough daily interviews were collected to provide sufficient data for meaningful analysis.)

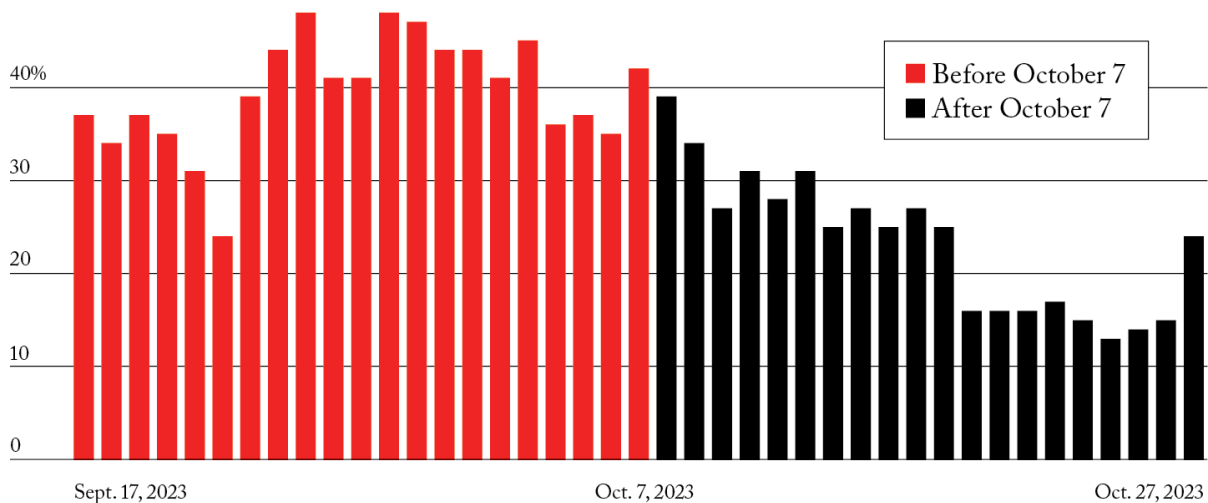
After plotting this moving average, we calculated a best-fit line for interviews conducted before and after October 7 to understand what changes, if any, resulted for each question. This line helped show how Tunisians' views shifted in real time. Our ultimate estimates for the change in public opinion, however, focused on two numbers. The first is the average view of Tunisians before October 7. The second is the level of support based on the average from the best-fit line for October 27.

There were many shifts. Yet the largest had to do with perceptions of the United States. In the 1,146 interviews carried out before the October 7 attack, 40 percent of Tunisians had a positive or somewhat positive view of the United States, compared with 56 percent who had an unfavorable opinion. But after the war in Gaza began, that quickly changed. By the end of our fieldwork, only ten percent of Tunisians had a positive view of the United States. Eighty-seven percent, by contrast, had an unfavorable

impression. Before October 7, 56 percent of Tunisians wanted closer economic relations with the United States. Three weeks later, that number had fallen to 34 percent. Biden was never particularly popular in Tunisia, with an approval rating of 29 percent before October 7. But after Israel began its campaign—and Biden declared there were “no conditions” on U.S. support—his favorability rating fell to just six points.

A BLOW TO AMERICA

Percentage of Tunisian respondents who said they had a favorable or very favorable view of the United States



Source: Arab Barometer Wave VIII, Tunisia (2023). Three-day rolling average.

Correlation, of course, does not mean causation. But in this case, it is hard to see an alternative explanation, particularly given the steady, daily shift in Tunisian opinion. The war was by far the biggest news event that took place during the survey, and other responses made it clear that Tunisians were thinking about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as they evaluated the United States. When Tunisians were asked which U.S. policies are most important to them in the Middle East and North Africa, resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict rose dramatically after October 7—from 24 percent to 59 percent. By comparison, the number of Tunisians

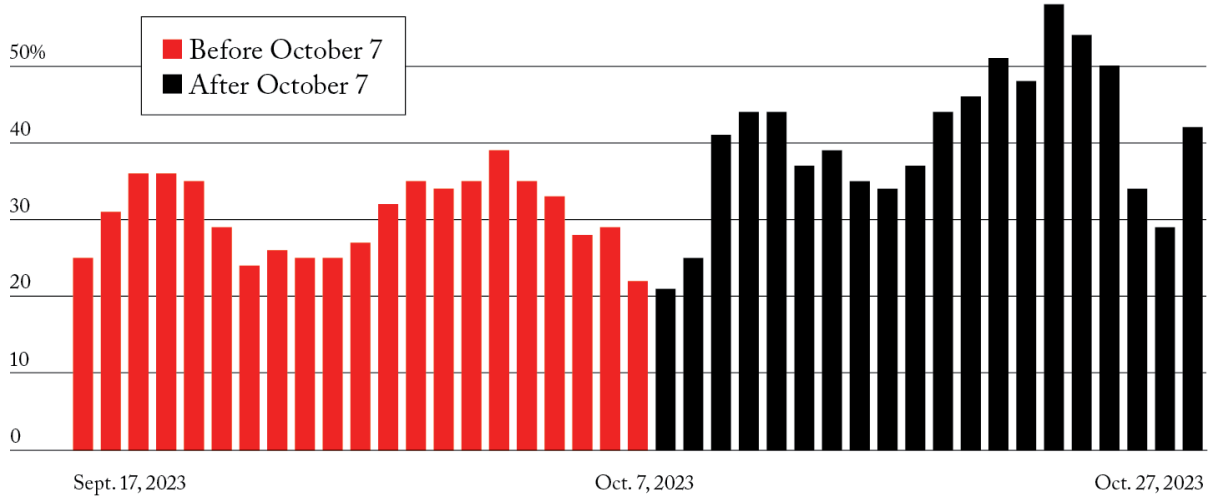
who answered “economic development” fell from 20 percent to four percent.

So far, worsening opinions about the United States have not directly translated into gains for China and Russia, both of which have stayed neutral in the war. Before the Hamas attack, 70 percent of Tunisians had a positive view of China; by October 27, that figure had increased by a modest five points. The number of people who wanted warmer economic relations with China dipped from 80 percent to 78 percent, within the margin of error. Before the attack, 56 percent of Tunisians held a favorable view of Russia compared with 53 percent at the end of our research. The share of people who wanted closer economic ties to Moscow went from 72 percent to 75 percent.

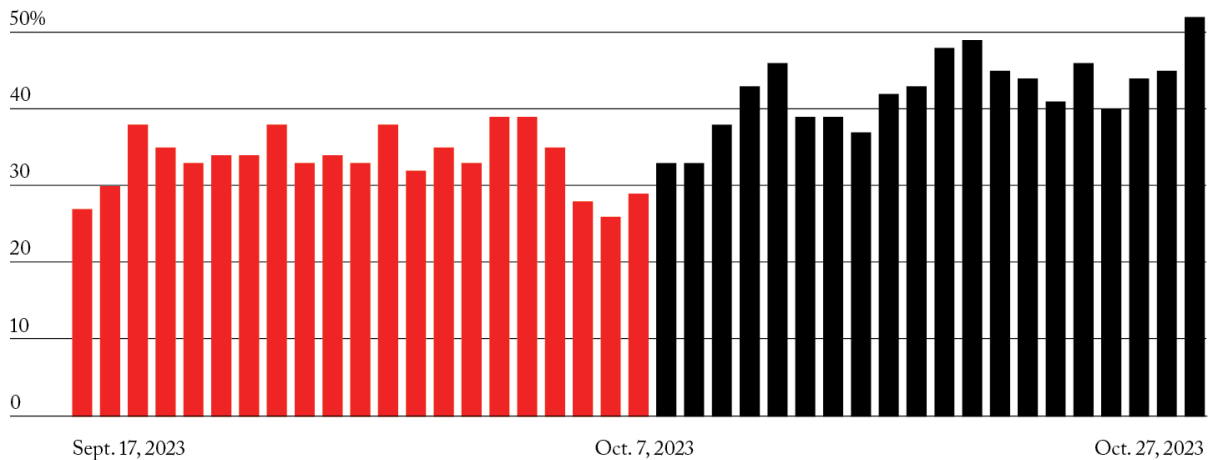
But there are signs that China, at least, could win greater support at the expense of the United States. When asked before October 7 whether Beijing or Washington had better policies toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a third of Tunisians preferred China’s policies to the United States’. By the end of our polling, this figure had risen to 50 percent. (The share of Tunisians preferring U.S. policy went from 13 percent to 14 percent.) When asked whether China or the United States had better policies for maintaining regional security, the results were similar. Before October 7, the number of people who preferred Chinese policy rose from 31 percent to 50 percent. The percentage of Tunisians who preferred U.S. policy fell from 19 percent to 12 percent.

A BOON TO CHINA

Percentage of Tunisian respondents who said Chinese policy is better than U.S. policy at addressing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict



Percentage of Tunisian respondents who said Chinese policy is better than American policy at maintaining regional security



Source: Arab Barometer Wave VIII, Tunisia (2023). Three-day rolling average.

GUILT BY ASSOCIATION

Great powers are not the only states that Tunisians now view differently. The population's attitude toward a number of regional powers also shifted after October 7. Much like shifts in opinion toward Washington, the changes largely track with how these states treat Israel.

Consider, for example, Saudi Arabia. In the period leading up to the attack, there was widespread speculation that Riyadh would normalize relations with Israel. As anger at Israel built among Tunisians in the weeks following October 7, their views of Saudi Arabia also darkened—with the country's approval rating dropping from 73 percent to 59 percent. Similarly, the percentage of Tunisians who wanted closer economic relations with Saudi Arabia fell from an average of 71 percent to 61 percent. MBS's approval rating declined from 55 percent before the attack to 40 percent by October 27. These changes are especially notable given that Tunisian President Kais Saied, who enjoys high approval ratings at home, has very close links with MBS.

The questionnaire did not include direct queries about the United Arab Emirates, which normalized ties with Israel in August 2020. But it did ask about MBZ's foreign policies, and the results proved very similar to those for MBS. Before the October 7 attack, MBZ's policies were seen favorably by 49 percent of Tunisians. By the end of the fieldwork, that figure had dropped to a third.

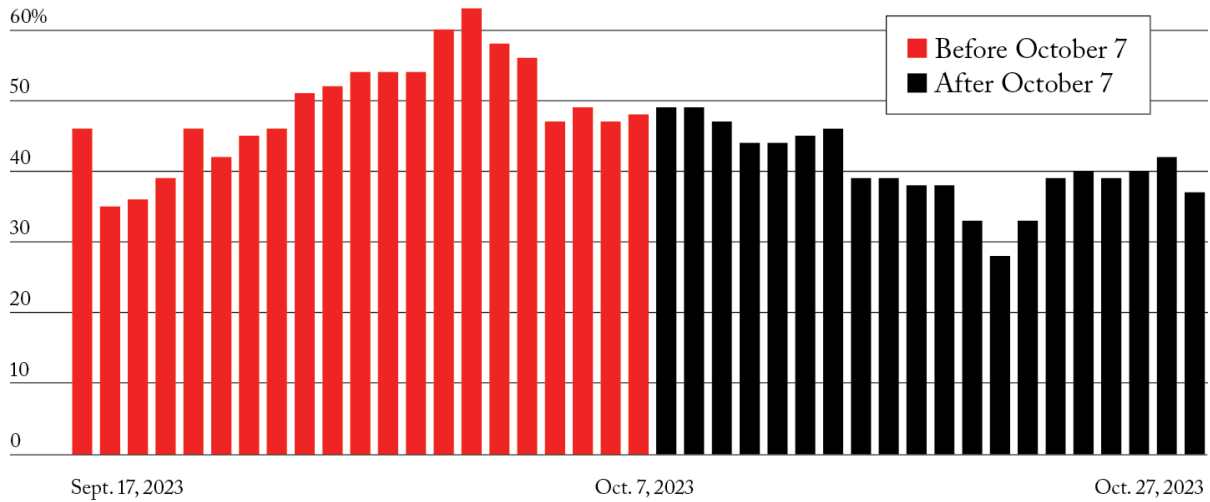
Views of Turkey, by contrast, were largely unchanged. Ankara has long sought to highlight and empathize with the plight of the Palestinians, albeit from the sidelines, and 68 percent of Tunisians had a positive view of Turkey both before and after the attack. Views of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's foreign policy declined from 54 percent to 47 percent, but the number of people who wanted a closer economic relationship with the country increased, going from 57 percent to 64 percent.

Still, the war in Gaza did not seem to improve the views of Turkey among Tunisians, perhaps because its condemnation of Israel was relatively constrained. But one country's leadership did seem to benefit: that of Iran. The Islamic Republic is ardently opposed to Israel's existence, and it cheered on Hamas's attack. In an appeal that surely resonated with

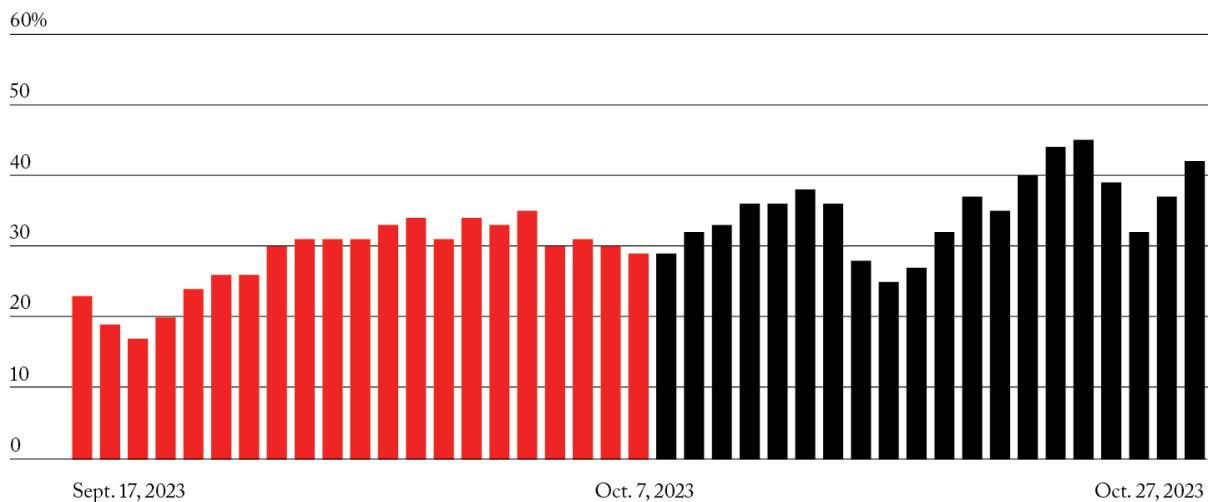
Arab public opinion, on October 17, Khamenei called for an end to the bombing of Gaza and labeled Israel's actions a "genocide." Although the survey did not include views toward Iran itself, it did ask about the foreign policies of Khamenei, and approval clearly went up. Before the attack, just 29 percent of Tunisians held a favorable view of his foreign policies. At the end of our fieldwork, this figure had risen to 41 percent. The jump in support was most notable in the days following Khamenei's October 17 statement.

HURTING THE UAE, HELPING IRAN

Percentage of Tunisian respondents who said Emirati President Mohammed bin Zayed's regional policies are good or very good



Percentage of Tunisian respondents who said Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's regional policies are good or very good



Source: Arab Barometer Wave VIII, Tunisia (2023). Three-day rolling average.

And then there is Israel itself. Even before the attack, Tunisians had an extremely unfavorable view of Israel—just five percent of people rated the

country positively. As a result, the country's decline to effectively zero percent was not much of a fall at all. But opinions about normalization did shift. Normalizing ties with Israel was never popular, yet after the attack, what little support there was had completely dissipated. On October 7, 12 percent of people supported normalization. By October 27, that figure hit just one percent.

Views of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also changed in important ways. Before October 7, when asked about their preferred means of solving the conflict, 66 percent of Tunisians favored a two-state solution based on the 1967 borders, whereas 18 percent favored an alternative diplomatic path, such as a single state with equal rights for all or a confederation. Just six percent of Tunisians chose "other," the vast majority of whom proposed armed resistance to Israel's occupation, possibly entailing the elimination of the state of Israel. But by the end of our fieldwork, only 50 percent of Tunisians supported the two-state solution. Those in favor of a one-state solution or a confederation fell by seven points combined. The biggest gain was the "other" category, which increased by 30 points to 36 percent. Once again, the vast majority of these Tunisians wanted continued, armed resistance.

BREAK THE CYCLE

Tunisia is geographically remote from Israel, and its population's growing appetite for an armed resistance is unlikely to directly affect the war. But if other Arab states have had similar shifts in opinion, fighting on Israel's borders could flare further. And in all likelihood, anger at Israel has grown even more in countries closer to the conflict or in those housing more Palestinian refugees, such as Jordan and Lebanon. The potential for greater violence is, therefore, serious. The Middle East and North Africa, after all, are plagued by more ongoing conflicts than any other part of the world.

As the bombardment of Gaza continues, this risk will only grow. In fact, even after the fighting ends, the region may remain more precarious. A new generation has now seen the horrors of the occupation on television and on social media, including tragic images of dead bodies and anguished

families that they are unlikely to forget. Some percentage of them may choose to fund, join, or otherwise help armed groups fighting against Israel's existence. The country's politicians may think this war will make them safer, but Israel's security will not increase because of the conflict.

The simple fact is that the Palestinian cause remains vitally important to the Arab world, and Israel cannot hope to simply defeat it with bombs. This issue has not lost its salience to a new generation. Despite what many Western (and some Arab) capitals may have assumed, Israel will not be able to make peace with its neighbors as long as the Palestinians do not have a state. In just 20 days, Tunisians' views on the world shifted in ways that rarely happen even over the course of a few years. There is no other issue across the Arab world to which people feel so individually and emotionally connected.

This intensity is particularly striking given Tunisia's domestic challenges. The state now has a GDP per capita that is lower than it was before the country's 2010 revolution. And yet Tunisians still wanted less economic engagement with the United States. According to our data, by October 27, Tunisians preferred international engagement on the Palestinian cause over economic development by an enormous margin—59 percent to four percent.

If Israel and the United States seek genuine peace with the Arab world—rather than a cold peace with the repressive regimes that rule most of it—they must change their policies. They need to find a way to end the ongoing struggle between the Israelis and the Palestinians. And that means all these groups must diligently work toward a fair and dignified future for the Palestinian people: specifically, a two-state solution. It is the only way to change the hearts and minds of neighboring populations and bring an end to the cycle of violence that has plagued the Middle East for the last century.