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Arab Opinion on Iran: The Gaza War Perspective

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Introduction

In February 2024, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies published a [survey](#) across 16 Arab nations, encompassing over 8,000 respondents and representing more than 95% of the Arab population, that was conducted between December 12, 2023, and January 5, 2024. The findings appear indicative of the Gulf region, covering four Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Oman. The first conclusion to be extracted from the survey is that Iran emerged as the most influential regional actor in its response to Israel's Gaza conflict, with 48% of Arabs expressing support for Tehran's stance, surpassing other regional and international players like Turkey, China, Russia, Germany, and France.

Iran's relatively positive perception also comes against negative Arab public opinion towards Arab states' responses to the Israeli war on Gaza. The [survey findings](#) reveal that the majority of Arabs had negative views on the UAE's stance, with 67% expressing it was either bad or very bad, while only 20% viewed it positively. Similarly, 64% perceived Saudi Arabia's position unfavorably, whereas 25% saw it in a positive light. Negative views towards Egypt's stance stood at 54% and 54% of respondents held a negative perception of the Palestinian Authority's position.

The only exception was Qatar, as 51% of the respondents viewed its position positively. Since the beginning of the war, Qatar has played a significant role and put immense diplomatic efforts in [mediating](#) between Israel and Hamas, recently securing a seven-day window for hostage release, facilitating humanitarian aid entry into Gaza, and negotiating vital medicine delivery to benefit civilians and released hostages.

Iran as a Lesser Evil in the Region

The [poll](#) results indicate a shift in perception, with Iran viewed as a lesser threat to regional security and stability post-Gaza conflict compared to 2018. While 7% of Arabs consider Iran as the primary threat (down from 13% in 2018), 51% identify U.S. policies as the most menacing, followed by Israel at 26%.

Despite the Gaza conflict fostering less negative sentiments towards Tehran, the data aligns with longer-term trends in Iran's regional image, reflecting the relative nature of its reputation. While enjoying predominantly favorable views until 2011, Iran's standing significantly deteriorated following the Arab Uprisings and unrest in Bahrain, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, where Iran played a direct or indirect role. While sectarian arguments surrounding the Sunni-Shia divide have emerged as a primary fault line in perceptions, the overall picture

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remains complex, influenced by factors such as reactions to U.S. and Israeli policies, comparisons between governmental and Iranian responses, Iran's behavior in the region, and the foreign policies of other Arab states. It is premature to assume that Iran has garnered a majority favorable image in the Gulf or the broader region. However, the overall landscape reflects regional developments since 2017, including the Qatar blockade, Saudi-Emirati intervention in Yemen, and Gulf-Israeli normalization, which have partially altered the predominantly negative perception of Iran following years of Arab Uprisings.

Can Iran Translate Its Favorable Image into Concrete Foreign Policy Gains?

Israel's military campaign in Gaza presents yet another unique opportunity for Iran, reminiscent of its strategic gains following the 2006 Israeli attacks on Gaza and Lebanon. [Past polling data](#) from 2008 revealed significant Arab support for Iran's nuclear program, with 67% of Arabs advocating for its right to pursue nuclear capabilities. This sentiment was even more pronounced in Saudi Arabia (71%) and Jordan (75%), two key Sunni-majority nations in the region. Similarly, leaders associated with the "axis of resistance" enjoyed considerable popularity among Arabs during that period. According to the same polls, Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Lebanese Hezbollah, emerged as the most admired figure, followed by Syria's Bashar al-Assad and Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The current Gaza war offers Iran potential opportunities to leverage its foreign policy objectives once again. Iran might

seize this opportunity to advance its strategic and diplomatic goals, especially in the Gulf region.

First, Iran can benefit from this positive outlook to enhance its recent rapprochement with the Arab states, particularly with Saudi Arabia who restored formal [diplomatic relations](#) in a groundbreaking deal brokered by China in March 2023. Indeed, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi [visited](#) Saudi Arabia on November 2023, for the first time, attending an emergency summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and holding inaugural meetings with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud (MbS) and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi. Taking advantage of Arab public support for a shared cause, Iranian leaders may continue investing in diplomatic outreach to the Gulf monarchies and other Arab states. This moment is significant for Iran, as Tehran can leverage both public support and Arab states' willingness to restore relations, without the burden of sectarian narratives of the previous decade.

Second, Iran can re-position itself as a regional power vis-à-vis two other non-Arab regional states, Turkey and Israel. Capitalizing on Israel's tarnished image and Turkey's limited leverage over the Gaza War and the Palestinian cause, potentially Iran can compete more effectively, both ideationally and materially, in the region.

Third, Israel's war on Gaza gives Iran a unique opportunity to thwart a potential Gulf-Israeli alliance against Iran and torpedo the normalization process between Saudi Arabia and Israel. The poll results [show](#) that most important action (36%) that Arab

governments should take to stop the war on Gaza, is cancelling all relations or normalization processes with Israel. In a parallel fashion, contrasting the findings of this survey with those of the 2022 poll reveals a rise of 5% in the proportion of individuals who oppose recognition, climbing from 84% in the previous year to 89% in the latest survey. Of particular interest, a statistically significant increase is noted in [Saudi Arabia](#) in the percentage of those who oppose recognizing Israel, from 38% in the 2022 poll to 68% this round.

Challenges ahead

The recent poll results reflect Arab perceptions towards the regional and international actors in the aftermath of war on Gaza. Primarily, Gaza and Palestinian cause preserves its importance in the hearts and minds of Arab people, regardless of their nationality. The results indicates that the Arab populace regards the Palestinian cause as a matter concerning all Arabs rather than solely Palestinians, with nearly a unanimous agreement among citizens surveyed, reaching 92%, marking the [highest ratio since 2011](#). The favorable views towards Iran highlight the importance placed by Arab populace on support for the Palestine cause by regional states. This might open new possibilities for Iran to re-shape its regional standing and diplomatic engagements with Arab governments, particularly with Saudi Arabia.

Nevertheless, the path ahead is not without its challenges. While it appears that Iran has capitalized on another historic opportunity reminiscent of 2008, the landscape of regional

dynamics and states has evolved significantly over the past 15 years. The regional state system is now more fragmented, and the balance of power in the region has shifted notably. Iran now contends with increasingly assertive and capable Gulf States, as well as more empowered proxies spanning from Iraq to Yemen. This presents Tehran with significant challenges in maintaining its position as a regional leader.

Iran risks undermining its credibility as it navigates a delicate balance between prioritizing its national security and maintaining its vocal support for Palestine. This focus on homeland defense over external commitments could widen the gap between its rhetoric and actual actions, potentially leading to legitimacy issues. Such a shift may challenge Iran's image among allies and adversaries alike, who closely watch its adherence to its stated commitments, especially regarding the Palestinian cause.

Iran's relations with its proxy groups, especially in the context of Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, may present obstacles to its ambitions for regional normalization and improved relations with its neighbors. These obstacle stem from the difficulty in exercising effective control over such proxies, whose actions can often escalate tensions in the region. The Houthis' military operations, attributed to Iranian support, despite Iranian denial of a direct order to do so, not only complicate Iran's diplomatic efforts to stabilize relations with Gulf countries but also risk drawing additional scrutiny and intervention from external powers opposed to Iran's influence in the Middle East.

As these proxy activities continue, they threaten to undermine Iran's attempts at portraying itself as a stabilizing force and a potential partner for peace in the region, and instead, could serve as a catalyst for anti-Iran sentiments, encouraging countries outside the immediate region to increase their military and diplomatic presence in strategic areas like the Gulf and the Bab-el-Mandeb strait. Miscalculations in that regards can backfire, and all the political capital achieved since October 7, can rapidly vanish.

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About the Gulf Insights series:

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words. All articles published under "Gulf Insight" series have been discussed internally but they reflect the opinion and views of the authors, and do not reflect the views of the Center, the College of Arts and Sciences or Qatar University.

