



Report

Opinion Poll: “Arab Elites’ Attitudes toward Arab-Iranian Relations and Iran’s Role in the Region”

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- Sampling followed a randomized stratified approach (each country representing one strata) with an overall margin of error of + / - 2.5 per cent.
- The questions on the poll addressed the following subjects:
 - Evaluating Arab-Iranian relations now and in the future
 - Iran as a model of governance
 - Arab revolutions and Iran's intervention in the region
 - Iran-US rapprochement and its impact on Arab world
- Key findings include:
 - Arab elites overwhelmingly rated present political and security relations between Iran and the Arab world as bad or very bad. Nearly half of those surveyed also believe that political and security relations with Iran (48 and 49 per cent, respectively) will get worse over the next five years.
 - About 60 per cent of the respondents said they would like to visit Iran. Of those that want to visit Iran, 65 per cent stated it was for cultural reasons.
 - 92 per cent of Arab elites said they do not consider the Iranian state as a model that should be followed in governance.
 - In the cases of Syria, Iraq and Yemen, over 80 per cent of Arab elites said that Iran's interests were not a justification for its intervention those nations, respectively.
 - Of those surveyed, over 70 per cent have "many" or "some" concerns about recent rapprochement between Iran and the US, with the most common concern cited "increased Iranian hegemony in the region".
 - Israel was most frequently cited as the nation posing the greatest threat to the Arab region, followed by Iran.

I. Rating Arab-Iranian relations now and in the future

Two general trends became clear from respondents' answers to the questions on this topic. First, Arab elites rated political, economic, security, cultural and social relations between their countries and Iran as extremely negative. Second, they do not generally see any of these relations improving over the next five years. Table 1A contains the breakdown of responses from the series of questions, "In general, how do you rate Arab-Iranian (political, economic, security, cultural, social) relations at the present time?" Table 1B contains the breakdown of responses from the series of questions, "Over the next five years, do you believe (political, economic, security, cultural, social) Arab-Iranian relations will get better, stay the same, or get worse?"

Table 1A. Arab-Iranian relations in the present time					
	Political Relations	Economic Relations	Security Relations	Cultural Relations	Social Relations
Excellent	1 %	1 %	1 %	1 %	1 %
Good	8 %	32 %	8 %	19 %	23 %
Bad	61 %	50 %	44 %	56 %	54 %
Very bad	28 %	10 %	43 %	20 %	15 %
Refused/Don't know	3 %	6 %	4 %	4 %	6 %

Table 1B. Arab-Iranian relations over the next five years					
	Political Relations	Economic Relations	Security Relations	Cultural Relations	Social Relations
Better	29 %	34 %	27 %	26 %	25 %
Same	21 %	26 %	22 %	34 %	35 %
Worse	48 %	38 %	48 %	38 %	36 %
Refused/Don't know	2 %	3 %	2 %	2 %	4 %

When asked to rate relations between Iran and the Arab world in general at the present time, 90 per cent of those surveyed said that Arab-Iranian relations are worse than they should be. Only five per cent said they were as they should be, and four per cent said they were better than they should be.

When asked to choose between four of the most serious challenges facing Arab-Iranian relations, 39 per cent of Arab elites said the struggle over political roles and influence was the number one challenge influencing ties between the two sides. The second greatest challenge was Iran's intervention in the Arab world, the third was sectarian differences and the fourth was western intervention.

Table 1C. Biggest challenges facing Arab-Iranian relations	
Struggle over political roles and influence	39 %
Iran's intervention in Arab countries	29 %
Sectarian differences	25 %
Western intervention	7 %
Refused/Don't know	0 %

Finally, Arab elites believe that their individual countries and the Arab world in general are more serious than Iran about building excellent ties with Iran. Table 1D contains the results from the series of questions that asked the respondents, "To what extent do you believe the Arab world/your country are serious about building excellent relations with Iran?" and, "To what extent is Iran serious about building excellent relations with the Arab world?"

Table 1D. Seriousness of building excellent relations between the various actors

	Arabs	Country	Iran
Very serious	6 %	23 %	9 %
Serious to some extent	55 %	42 %	30 %
Not too serious	32 %	24 %	41 %
Not serious at all	3 %	6 %	17 %
Refused/Don't know	3 %	5 %	1 %

II. Perceptions of Iran and Iran as a model of governance

A majority of Arab elites who responded to the survey said that they believed that negative perceptions of Iranians by Arabs, and vice versa, were either “very prevalent” or “prevalent to some extent”. Table 2A summarises the results from the question that asked respondents, “In your opinion, to what extent is the negative stereotype of Arabs prevalent among Iranians?” Table 2B summarises the results from the opposite question, “In your personal opinion, to what extent is the negative stereotype of Iranians prevalent among Arabs?”

Table 2A. Extent to which negative stereotype of Arabs prevalent among Iranians

Very prevalent	39 %
Prevalent to some extent	43 %
Not too prevalent	8 %
Not prevalent at all	2 %
Refused/Don't know	8 %

Table 2B. Extent to which negative stereotype of Iranians prevalent among Arabs

Very prevalent	41 %
Prevalent to some extent	46 %
Not too prevalent	10 %
Not prevalent at all	1 %
Refused/Don't know	2 %

When asked to choose from three options describing the ties between Iranian people and Arab people, over half of the respondents said that “they are two different peoples with some shared characteristics”. Table 2C breaks down these responses.

Table 2C. Citizens of the Arab world and Iran can best be described as...

Two different peoples with some shared characteristics	57 %
One (Islamic) nation, although each group can be distinguished by its unique attributes	32 %
Two different peoples with no shared characteristics	9 %
Refused/Don't know	1 %

While Arab elites said they believed that there were shared characteristics between the two peoples, when it came to viewing Iran as a model of governance, most respondents (92 per cent) said that Iran is not a model that should be followed in governance. Sixty-six per cent of respondents, when asked to rate democracy in Iran on a scale from one to ten (with one being completely undemocratic), rated Iran as one, two or three. Table 2D contains the ratings divided into three categories: not democratic, democratic to some extent and completely democratic.

Table 2D. Rating Iran’s democracy on a scale of one to ten (one being not democratic at all)	
Not democratic (1, 2 or 3)	66 %
Democratic to some extent (4, 5 or 6)	31 %
Completely democratic (7, 8, 9 or 10)	3 %

III. Arab revolutions and Iranian intervention in the region

Respondents were given three choices to rate Iran’s role in the Arab region in response to the following question, “In general, how would you rate Iran’s role in the region over the past ten years?” Nearly 70 per cent of them said that Iran’s role in the region over the past ten years was negative and threatened Arab interests. Table 3A contains the breakdown of responses to this question.

Table 3A. Iran’s role in the region over the past ten years	
Negative role that threatened Arab interests	67 %
Mixed role that was both positive and negative	30 %
Positive role that was considerate of Arab interests	2 %

Arab elites were also asked to evaluate Iran’s role and attitude towards the Arab Spring revolutions. Nearly 80 per cent of them said Iran’s attitude towards the Arab Spring revolutions was “extremely negative” or “negative to some extent”. Table 3B contains the breakdown of responses to the question, “In your opinion, do you believe that Iran’s attitude towards the Arab Spring revolutions which started in 2011 was...?”

Table 3B. Iran’s attitude towards Arab Spring revolutions	
Extremely negative	44 %
Negative to some extent	34 %
Extremely positive	3 %
Positive to some extent	13 %
Refused/Don’t know	6 %

When those who saw its attitude as negative were asked to answer, “Why?”, with an open-ended response, the most common response (at 37 per cent) fell under the theme

that “Iran intervened politically and militarily on the side of oppression to quash revolutions”. The most common theme of responses (at 41 per cent) for those that saw Iran’s attitude towards the Arab Spring revolutions as positive was that “Iran supported change and enriched the revolutionary narrative in the Arab world”.

Over 80 per cent of Arab elites surveyed said that Iran’s image in the Arab world was worse than it was before the Arab Spring in response to the question, “In your opinion, do you think Iran’s image in the Arab world after the Arab Spring revolutions is”... Table 3C summarizes the responses to this question.

Table 3C. Iran’s image in the Arab world after Arab Spring revolutions	
Worse than it was before the Arab Spring	82 %
Same as it was before the Arab Spring	10 %
Better than it was before the Arab Spring	6 %
Refused/Don’t know	2 %

In particular, Arab elites were asked to examine Iran’s role in Syria. 90 per cent of those surveyed said that they agreed that, “The fall of Bashar al-Assad’s regime in Syria would threaten Iran’s interests in the region”. Table 3D summarizes the results from another, related question, asking respondents to define what was happening in Syria as either a revolution, a conspiracy, or “something else” (open-ended). Two main themes emerged from the open-ended responses, as detailed in the table.

Table 3D. Which of these is closer to your opinion?	
What is happening in Syria today is a people’s revolution against the regime	62 %
What is happening in Syria today is a foreign conspiracy against the country	13 %
Open-ended theme 1: What is happening in Syria today is an international conflict	9 %
Open-ended theme 2: What is happening in Syria today is a revolution that has been converted into a conspiracy or civil war	13 %
Refused/Don’t know	3 %

In the case of Syria, Iraq and Yemen, over 80 per cent of those surveyed said that Iran’s intervention in those revolutions was not justifiable. Table 3E details the responses from the series of questions that asked respondents if they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed or strongly disagreed with the same statement about all three nations, “To what extent do you agree or disagree: In order to preserve its interests and security, it is justifiable for Iran to intervene in...”

Table 3E. In order to preserve its interests and security, it is justifiable for Iran to intervene in...			
	Syria	Iraq	Yemen
Strongly disagree	64 %	66 %	68 %
Disagree	21 %	20 %	19 %
Agree	10 %	9 %	9 %
Strongly agree	3 %	3 %	2 %
Refused/Don't know	2 %	2 %	2 %

While Palestine is not considered an Arab Spring state, Iran has played a clear role in the Palestinian issue and its “resistance against Israel” narrative has been used to justify its intervention in Syria. Arab elites were asked about their view of Iran’s role in Palestine, as well as that of Arab states. Eighty-eight per cent strongly agreed or agreed that the Palestinian issue is used by Iran to increase its role in the region, and 90 per cent of those surveyed strongly agreed or agreed that this is due to the failure of Arab institutions in supporting the Palestinian cause.

V. Iran-US rapprochement and its impact on the Arab world

While Arab elites are fairly split about whether or not they support Iran-US rapprochement (44 per cent for and 45 per cent against), 70 per cent have “many” or “some” concerns about recent rapprochement between Iran the US, with the most common concern (expressed by 34 per cent of the respondents) increased Iranian hegemony in the region.

Table 4A shows results from the question, “Are you with or against Iran-US rapprochement?” Table 4B breaks down the responses from the question, “One of the key results of Iran-US rapprochement has been a stronger regional role for Iran. Do you have any concerns about this?”

Table 4A. With or against Iran-US rapprochement?	
With	44 %
Against	45 %
Refused/Don't know	11 %

Table 4B. Iran's stronger role in the region	
Yes, I have many concerns	42 %
Yes, I have some concerns	28 %
No, I do not have any concerns	28 %
Refused/Don't know	1 %

Table 4C outlines the themes which emerged from the open-ended question which asked respondents who said they have “many” or “some” concerns about Iran’s more prominent role in the region to identify their most important concerns.

Table 4B. Most important concerns regarding Iran’s more prominent role in the region	
Increasing Iranian hegemony in the region	34 %
Iran as the new policeman of the region	21 %
US and Iranian interests converge at expense of Arabs	19 %
Threaten Arab national security	11 %
Further divisions in the Arab and Islamic world	8 %
Further fuelling sectarian conflicts	6 %
Refused/Don’t know	1 %

Concluding remarks

Over 80 per cent of Arab elites “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that Arab-Iranian relations were heading in the direction of increasing in tension. On the other hand, 69 per cent support the establishment of a cooperative regional security order between Iran and the GCC countries. Overall, the survey results indicate that while Arab elites are aware of the dismal reality of Arab-Iranian relations, Arab elites desire better political, economic, security, cultural and social ties between the two sides.

When Arab elites were asked to identify the nations which posed the greatest threat to the region, 62 per cent said Israel. Twenty-three per cent said Iran, and only 5 per cent said the United States. This is noteworthy because Arab elites now identify Iran as the second-largest threat to the Arab world, and it is also noteworthy because it indicates that the Palestinian issue, which many respondents said Iran uses to further its interests in the region, remains high on the agenda of Arab elites.

This survey is the first of its kind on Arab-Iranian relations, and provides a unique look at the way Arab elites rate this relationship, how they view the future of the relationship, what role they believe Iran has played in the Arab revolutions and how Iran-US rapprochement has impacted Iran’s role in the Arab world. It paves the way for further country studies that focus on the impact of Iran’s increased role in the respective nations represented in the study, as well as outlines the issues that will continue to impact the relationship between Iran and the Arab world.

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