

# The Arab World, the Question of Palestine and the Spectrum of the Arab Spring.

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**BUILDING RESILIENCE IN THE SOUTH SERIES** – COMMENTARY

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Amidst the chaos of the latest Israel-Gaza war, the popular adage, "All Arabs are colonised, except for Palestinians" resonates profoundly throughout Arab streets. While the Free World swiftly rallied to support Israel militarily, financially, diplomatically, and rhetorically in the aftermath of the October 7 attacks, Arab governments maintained a conspicuous silence as civilian casualties mounted in Gaza, often occurring at their literal borders, as seen in the cases of Egypt and Jordan.

Saudi Arabia continues to signal openness to a peace agreement with Israel, while the UAE, Morocco, and Bahrain did not even recall their ambassadors. Jordan, although withdrawing its ambassadors, faces a unique challenge, with approximately half of its population being Palestinian.

Despite declared intentions by the Arab League to "break the siege" of Gaza, substantive action has yet to materialise, with no systematic effort to counter

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Israel's use of hunger as a weapon of war<sup>1</sup> through daily airdrops of food and medical aid to Gaza. For many, it appears that many Arab leaders perceive the Palestinian issue as a temporary inconvenience to their broader regional ambitions, and are content to await Israel's resolution of the matter.

The US-brokered Abraham Accords of 2020 marked a significant historical milestone, solidifying the Arabian Peninsula's status as the new hub of the Arab world. This historic agreement normalised diplomatic relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and later, Morocco. However, the establishment of diplomatic ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia, considered a pivotal step, has been delayed due to the ongoing war.

The delicate position Arab leaders find themselves in can be understood, in part, by the menacing spectrum of another Arab Spring, as most are aware the core grievances that sparked one of the region's most enduring social unrest have not been addressed. Additionally, prior to October 7, many Arab states were focused on large-scale development projects that require significant external funding, such as Saudi's 2030 vision and Egypt's US\$3 billion Extended Arrangement with the IMF.

The minimal attention given to the Palestinian issue by Arab governments stands in stark contrast to the sentiments expressed by the Arab populace, as highlighted in a recent public opinion survey<sup>2</sup> conducted by the Arab Center Washington DC and the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies across sixteen Arab countries between December 2023 and January 2024. Revealing a widespread consensus

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<sup>1</sup> The latest evidence is that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) declared Israel is no longer allowing the organisation to make aid deliveries to northern Gaza. "This is outrageous & makes it intentional to obstruct lifesaving assistance during a man-made famine," Philippe Lazzarini, the head of UNRWA, said on social media.

<sup>2</sup> <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/arab-public-opinion-about-israels-war-on-gaza/>

that the Palestinian cause is an Arab issue, the survey found that this sentiment is particularly strong in countries such as Saudi Arabia, Algeria, Jordan, Egypt, Sudan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Iraq, where over 90% of respondents expressed agreement with this view.

Significant shifts in public opinion were also observed in some countries following Israel's military campaign in Gaza. For instance, in Sudan, the percentage of respondents who viewed the Palestinian issue as a concern for all Arabs increased from 68% in 2022 to 91% in the most recent poll. Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, the percentage rose from 69% in 2022 to 95%, while in Morocco, it surged from 59% in 2022 to 95%. These findings underscore the profound impact of recent events on public perceptions of the Palestinian cause within the Arab world.

The poll further underscores notable shifts in public opinion across all surveyed countries, particularly regarding attitudes towards recognising Israel. Of particular significance is the substantial increase in the percentage of individuals opposing the recognition of Israel in Saudi Arabia, rising from 38% in the 2022 poll to 68% in the current survey. Similar statistically significant increases have been observed in other countries, such as Morocco, where opposition increased from 67% to 78%, and Sudan, where it rose from 72% to 81%.

Notably, the majority of respondents from countries whose governments have signed peace agreements with Israel, including Jordan, Palestine, Egypt, Morocco and Sudan, oppose their respective countries recognising Israel. This sentiment is particularly pronounced in Jordan, Palestine, and Egypt, where there is near-unanimous opposition to the recognition of Israel. These findings underscore the complexity of public attitudes towards the recognition of Israel across the greater region, reflecting both geopolitical realities and historical grievances.

Perhaps more importantly, the survey highlights how the positions of different international and regional actors are perceived. A near-consensus of 94% of respondents viewed the US position unfavourably, with 82% considering it very unfavourable. European countries are no different: a majority of 79% of respondents regarded the French position as unfavourable, while only 10% viewed it positively. Similarly, 75% of respondents perceived Germany's position unfavourably, with only 9% holding a positive view. Likewise, 78% of respondents viewed the British position negatively, compared to 8% who viewed it positively.

However, opinions were divided on the positions of Russia and China. While 42% of respondents saw the Russian position negatively, 41% evaluated it positively. Similarly, 38% of respondents viewed the Chinese position unfavourably, while 40% saw it in a positive light. In contrast, 48% of respondents expressed a positive view of the Iranian position, with 37% holding a negative view. Similarly, 47% of respondents viewed the Turkish position positively, compared to 40% who viewed it negatively.

These findings carry significant implications that warrant careful consideration. Firstly, the perceived role of the United States and the EU as peace brokers and beacon of human rights do not resonate with most Arab peoples anymore, as evidenced by the survey results above. Secondly, Russia and China are increasingly viewed favourably in the region due to their perceived potential as counterpowers to Western hegemony – a hegemony that many feel has failed Palestinians thus far. Lastly, the survey underscores a longstanding and concerning gap between the positions held by Arab citizens on the Israel-Palestine issue and the actions taken by Arab leaders. It is precisely this level of disharmony between decision-makers

and citizens that went unnoticed in the 2010s, going on to take external observers by surprise.

The aftermath of the Israel-Gaza war could mean a new political sequence for the region. In 2011, majority demands focused on socioeconomic and democratic reforms. Today, the detailed and live access to images and testimonies of what has been dubbed 'the most documented genocide in history' – spanning more than half a year at the time of publication – could be fomenting unprecedented grievances in a region that has largely been shaped by the many episodes of the Israel-Palestine issue.

Over the past decade, the Arab world has experienced two significant waves of social movements, in 2011 and 2019, driven by demands for political reform and social justice. As tensions simmer over the humanitarian crisis in Palestine, there's a growing perception of Arab leaders' and Western nations' complicity, setting the stage for a potential third 'Arab Spring.' This situation, fueled by regional discontent and global political dynamics, could unexpectedly ignite widespread protests, highlighting the ongoing struggle for governance reform and social equity in the region.

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