

# Arab Perspectives on Iran's Role in a Changing Middle East

The complexity of Arab attitudes toward Iran before and after the start of the Arab uprisings is reflected not only in the gap of perception between the Arab people and Arab governments, but also in important differences on Iran across those governments. Even among Arab governments most threatened by Iran and most inclined to see it weakened, their sense of threat and how to address it differs substantially from Israel's sense of threat.

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## **Arab Perspectives on Iran's Role in a Changing Middle East**

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Since the start of the Arab uprisings, there has been much discussion about how the new strategic environment in the Arab world will affect both Iran's role in regional politics and, more broadly, Arab attitudes toward Tehran. It was clear from the outset that the picture for Iran was mixed: on the one hand, there was the loss of key opponents, like Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, and the empowerment of the Shi'a communities in neighboring Arab states, especially Bahrain; on the other hand, there were the troubles of Iran's key allies in Damascus and the consequent pressure on Hezbollah in Lebanon. Overall, there was a sense that the Arab uprisings presented more costs than benefits for Iran. Add to this a prevalent assumption that a democratic Egypt that could regain its popularity in the Arab world would ultimately erode non-Arab Iran's influence—which is in good part a function of the vacuum of popular leadership in the Arab world—and Iran's prospects look even weaker.

Worries among Gulf states, particularly Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, about the expansion of the Arab uprisings to their own Shi'a populations have also increased these countries' incentives to highlight a perceived Iranian threat. But this picture masks a far more complex reality in Arab attitudes toward Iran before and after the start of the Arab uprisings. This complexity is reflected not only in the gap of perception between the Arab people on the one hand and Arab governments on the other, but also in important differences on Iran across Arab governments. And even among Arab governments most threatened by Iran and most inclined to see it weakened, including militarily, their sense of threat and how to address it differs substantially from Israel's sense of threat.

### **Arab Public vs. Government Attitudes Toward Iran**

In the era of Arab public uprisings, it is helpful to start with Arab public attitudes that have become increasingly important particularly in the formulation of policy toward Iran in post-Mubarak Egypt. These public attitudes also go to the heart of some of the worries about Iran felt by governments of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), especially the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia.

Despite the Sunni-Shi'a divide—especially in Arab states where Shi'a populations are majorities or pluralities such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain—which is often matched by a division in attitude about Iran in these countries along sectarian lines, Sunni Arab populations elsewhere tend to base their views of Iran on issues that go far beyond this divide, and on some of which they are inclined to favor Iran. In polls I have conducted in six Arab countries—Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Lebanon—Iran consistently placed third on the list of choices provided by respondents when asked to identify the “two most threatening states,” indicating that

many Arabs do see it as a threat. But what is more important in this case is that Arabs see Israel and the United States as presenting far greater threats. For example, in 2009, 88 percent of those polled identified Israel, 76 percent identified the United States, and only 12 percent identified Iran as one of the two greatest threats.<sup>1</sup> There was some change a year after the start of the Arab uprisings in the November 2011 poll, although Iran remained far behind Israel and the United States: 71 percent identified Israel, 59 percent identified the United States, and 18 percent identified Iran as one of the two greatest threats.

This ranking of the Iranian threat in relation to Israel and the United States is particularly important with regard to the nuclear issue, where worries about Israel and the United States trump worries about Iran's nuclear potential. Consistently, before and after the Arab uprisings, majorities of Arabs polled indicate their opposition to international pressure on Iran to curtail its nuclear program. This surprisingly includes Arab-Palestinian citizens of Israel who certainly would be as affected as its Jewish citizens in case of an Iranian nuclear attack on Israel. The sense of "double standards" in dealing with Israel's nuclear program on the one hand, and Arab and Muslim capabilities on the other, is one of the driving forces of Arab public attitudes on this issue.

The focus on Israel as the greatest threat gains Iran points as the enemy of the Arabs' enemy. This attitude was well reflected in reader comments in Al-Jazeera.net and Al-Arabiya.net when Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad visited Lebanon in 2010. One Al-Jazeera.net reader put it this way: "I don't like the Shi'a and I am against the visit at this point but we should thank Iran for its support of the resistance. So I don't know which camp I belong to." A reader of Alarabiya.net added, "How can those who are against the visit call for the liberation of Palestine? How can you object to his visit when he is championing the Palestinian cause?"<sup>2</sup>

Overall, Iran's support for Hezbollah and Hamas, which has been opposed by some Arab governments, particularly Saudi Arabia, has been popular among the Arab public, especially in Egypt, and more so in times of armed conflict involving Israel. Despite strong Arab public support for the Syrian rebels, for example, and frustrations with Hezbollah's support for the Bashar al-Assad regime in Syria, Hassan Nasrallah remained a popular figure in Egypt, even if less so than before. The November 2012 war between Israel and Hamas increased Arab public sympathy for Hezbollah and Iran as the Arab conclusion was that Israel's inclination to end the fighting early was mostly linked to Hamas's longer-range rockets that were supplied by Hezbollah and Iran.

But not all the positive attitudes toward Iran are related to Israel. There is a battle of narratives underway about the nature of the uprisings in the Arab world and whether they are "Arab" or "Islamic," i.e., inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Iran obviously has interest in the latter, which would be clearly a misreading of what actually transpired in Tunisia, Egypt, and elsewhere. But regardless of the character of the Arab uprisings

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<sup>1</sup> Polls cited in this paper can be found at [www.sadat.umd.edu](http://www.sadat.umd.edu).

<sup>2</sup> For further discussion of the variety of Arab reactions, see <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/wikileaks-the-arabs-4504>

and the driving forces behind them, the net result has been the empowerment of Islamists, including Salafis who had been waiting for decades for an opening to exert their political muscle. While in places like Egypt and Tunisia these are mostly Sunni forces, their affinity with the Islamic character of the Iranian Revolution has been consistent—despite their concern about Shi'a influence. In January 2013, a member of Egyptian Islamic Jihad, who was imprisoned in 1981 because of his group's involvement in the assassination of Anwar Sadat and spent the next 26 years in and out of Egyptian prisons, put it this way: "In the early 1980s, we were all inspired by the Iranian Revolution and admired Khomeini and we still admire much about the Islamic government of Iran. But we are different and we don't want them to rule over us."<sup>3</sup>

These two competing sets of attitudes toward Iran were reflected among more mainstream Islamists before and after the Revolution. During the Egyptian presidential campaign in 2012, a moderate Islamist candidate, Abd Al-Monem Abul Futouh, expressed his willingness to improve relations with Iran while warning Iran against efforts to spread Shi'a Islam in Egypt.

It may seem surprising that Egyptians, overwhelmingly Sunni and hosts to Al-Azhar University, a Sunni religious powerhouse, would fear efforts by Iran and by Egypt's Shi'a population—probably less than 2 percent of the country's population—to convert Egyptians to Shi'a Islam. Some of the projected fear is probably tactical, intended to elevate the influence of Sunni religious authorities, and some of it is likely deference to Sunni backers in the GCC states. But there is also a genuine concern that is rooted in a view that Egypt's religious culture reflects aspects that are more at home in Shi'a Islam than in Wahhabi Sunni Islam, such as the prevalence of religious shrines that date back to the influence of Fatimid control of Egypt from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Varieties of Arab Government Attitudes Toward Iran**

Arab governments worried about Iranian influence after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, and oil-wealthy Arab states bankrolled Iraq's war with the Islamic Republic for 8 years—even though most had no love for Saddam Hussein's regime. They saw Iran's influence expand after the 2003 war, given the decline of Iraq's power and increasing Iranian influence in Iraq itself. Part of the Arab rulers' concern pertains to Iranian influence with their restive Shi'a Arab communities, but it goes beyond that; the United Arab Emirates claims three islands that Iran controls in the Gulf; Saudi Arabia is heavily invested in Hezbollah's opponents in Lebanon; and all the Arab states in the region are American allies, with heavy and unpopular military presence in the region that the Islamic Republic of Iran uses against them.

But it is noteworthy that Iran's feared influence is only partly military and even more so political. It is also worth noting the differences among Arab states on how to deal with Iran.

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<sup>3</sup> Meeting in Cairo, January 8, 2013, at the Ibn Khaldoun Center.

There has been frequent citation of Saudi and Emirati official private statements encouraging an American military campaign against Iran. It is noteworthy, however, that even among GCC states there are different views on this, including in Kuwait and Qatar, with concerns about the costs of a potential war for them. This is also true of countries which otherwise want to see Iranian influence limited and see Iran as a threat, such as Jordan, which nonetheless worry about the consequences of war, and want to see the Palestinian-Israeli issue addressed as a way of limiting Iranian influence. The most important change in Arab calculations since the Arab uprisings, however, has occurred in Egypt.

Whereas former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak saw not only Iran as a threat but also Hezbollah and Hamas, President Muhammad Morsi's constituency is sympathetic to Hezbollah and even more so to Hamas and has been partly inspired by the accomplishments of the Islamic Revolution from its beginnings. Iran's nuclear potential is seen to highlight the need to limit Israel's own power, and Egypt sees some utility in cooperating with Iran—even as Morsi is careful to defend Sunni Islam and highlight Egypt's commitment to the Arab states of the Gulf whose financial backing he needs.

### **Arab Governments and the Nuclear Issue**

Whereas the Israeli fear of a nuclear Iran encompasses its consequences for Iran's projection of conventional power and influence, it centers principally on a sense of existential threat to Israel. Arabs, on the other hand, including GCC states, worry principally about Iran's conventional power and even more about its ability to influence their public opinion through the projection of power. Certainly they do not want to see a nuclear Iran, but driving this is an Arab public perception of Iranian power and achievement that in turn empowers segments of the public against the rulers. In the past few weeks, for example, following announcements by Iran that it had successfully sent a monkey to space and had produced its own fighter aircraft, the Saudi media gave much coverage to de-bunking the claims through stories that argued that the returned monkey appeared different from the one sent and the photos of the supposed Iranian airplane were Photoshopped. The bottom line is that much of the worry is about Iranian influence, more so than about possible Iranian nuclear weapons as such.

In fact, among those who appear to favor a possible American military strike on Iran, the betting is that Iran is much weaker than it looks militarily and that its ineffectiveness against a major American assault will only reveal its exaggerated claims and consequently reduce its influence, particularly related to its projected ability to stand up to Israel over the Palestinian issue. This betting is not widely shared among Arab governments, with many fearing that the consequences of war would be devastating to them and would play into Iran's hands by tapping into the deep reservoir of Arab anger toward Israel and the United States.

There may be some convergence, for varying reasons, between Israel and some GCC states in favor of an American military campaign against Iran. But the difference in

reasoning leads to different conclusions about a mediated deal with Iran and about the desired consequences of war. If Iran were to accept strict limits on enriching uranium on its soil and intrusive international inspections of its nuclear facilities, in exchange for total removal of international sanctions and acceptance of a regional role for Iran, Israeli and Saudi reactions would be different. Israel may be inclined to live with such a deal, although it would demand limits on Iranian support for Hezbollah and Hamas; the Saudis would feel uncomfortable with such a deal as it is likely to enhance Iranian economic and conventional power and provide further opportunities to expand Tehran's influence. War, too, would likely have different, possibly opposite, consequences for Israel and GCC states, as Arab states worry about a wider regional war that could be more devastating to them than to Israel. For GCC states, sustained containment of Iran may be a preferred strategy.

The complexity of these Arab attitudes means that, unless and until Egypt becomes a stable, popular, and credible Arab power that captures Arab public imaginations, Iran will continue to have ample opportunity to influence politics in the region, with or without war and regardless of what happens in Syria—particularly in the absence of Israeli-Palestinian peace. For American policy toward Iran, including the prospects of war, the starting point is, of course, an analysis of direct American interests. What is clear is that even aside from the potential military and economic costs of war with Iran, war is unlikely to limit, and can possibly expand, Iranian opportunities for influence in the Arab world—regardless of its consequences for Iran's nuclear program.

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Wilson Center.

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