

# Egyptians Value United States and China Equally, but Dislike both Iran and Israel

by [David Pollock \(/experts/david-pollock\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

## Popular attitudes in Egypt support both the United States and China, and indicate relative stability on domestic issues.

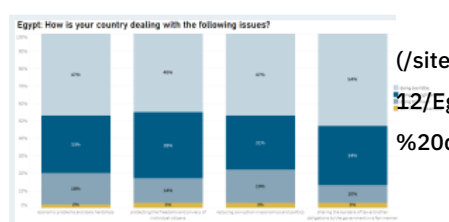
A rare new public opinion poll of Egyptians, commissioned by the Washington Institute and conducted in November 2021 by an independent regional survey research firm, shows a virtual tie between the United States and China as perceived partners for Egypt. Narrow majorities call relations with both powers “important.”

In sharp contrast, only small minorities voice favorable views of ties with either Israel or Iran. On domestic issues, around half the public is privately dissatisfied with government efforts on favoritism, individual freedoms, or everyday economic management—and around half sympathize at least somewhat with public protests against corruption.

### Egyptian Attitudes Show Few Changes on either Internal or External Issues

These perspectives are little changed from recent years, refuting various anecdotal or elite impressions of significant shifts on the Egyptian street. Macroeconomic growth has not translated into greater popular satisfaction. But neither has the country’s frenetic economic picture produced a greater popular disposition toward mass protest.

To put this in perspective, parallel November 2021 surveys show roughly the same numbers in Jordan on domestic issues—but in Lebanon, there is around twice the percentage of dissatisfaction and support for protests as Lebanese face a truly dire economic crisis. This survey also provides evidence that Egypt’s Christian minority, just under ten percent of the roughly 100 million total population, is marginally less dissatisfied with Cairo’s official policies, and less inclined to back public protests.



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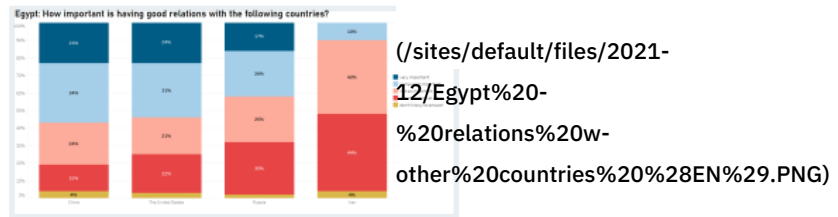
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On the external front, improved economic and diplomatic dealings with Israel, along with wider Arab participation in them, have not

enhanced Israel’s popular image in Egypt. And the widespread media meme of “American withdrawal” from the region has not trickled down to the street level; there is no change in the proportion of the public who value ties with Washington. Thus the overall political climate appears stable—probably offering Egypt’s government a comfortably familiar playing field, in both domestic and foreign policy.

**Majority Rate U.S. Ties “Important”—and Say China Cannot Replace Them**

Asked about foreign powers, 57% of Egyptians label good relations with China as “important” to their country. A statistically equivalent 55% say the same about the United States. Russia ranks significantly lower, at 43%. Responses to an openly comparative question amplify this message. The majority (58%) of Egyptians *disagree* with this assertion: “Our country cannot count on the United States these days, so we should look more to Russia or China as partners.” On this and other issues queried, the data show only very modest generational differences in attitude between those under and over 30 years of age.



Moreover, specific Russian or Chinese policies get lukewarm or even negative reactions. Notably, only half of Egyptians say that “the rise of Chinese investment in several Arab countries” will yield positive results for the region. Even more surprisingly, just one-third have a favorable opinion toward “the increase in Russian arms sales to several Arab countries.” On both counts, most Egyptians privately voice views at odds with Cairo’s current “party line”—buttressing the overall credibility of the survey.

**U.S. Military Gets Mixed Reviews; Democracy and Palestine Top Priorities**

Questions about specific American policies also generate diverse responses. Half of Egyptians say the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan will have a positive impact on the region, but nearly half (45%) say the opposite. A much clearer reaction relates to “the U.S. agreement to keep a few thousand military advisers in Iraq.” Three-quarters of Egyptians predict negative consequences from that decision, as against a mere 17% who foresee any positive effects. This lopsided result almost certainly stems from the enduring unpopularity of the original American military occupation of Iraq, dating back to 2003.

Looking forward, the Egyptian public has unexpectedly diverse preferences for American Mideast policy. Virtually tied for first place are “pushing for a solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict” (36%) and “promoting democracy and human rights in Arab countries” (32%). A distant third is “doing more to resolve the conflicts in Yemen and Libya (15%), or “working to contain Iran’s influence and activities in the region (14%). For comparison, a parallel poll in Saudi Arabia this November showed quite a different rank order, with all four options tied for first as desired priorities for American policy in the region.

**Solid Majority Say Iran Does Not Help Palestinians, and Hurts Other Arabs**

Regarding Iran, in stark contrast, only 12% of Egyptians say good relations with that country are important. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds (63%) of Egyptians agree with the following tough statement: “Wherever Iran intervenes, it hurts the local Arabs and doesn’t help the Palestinians.” Two-thirds also predict that the election of Ebrahim Raisi as Iran’s president last June will have a negative impact on the region.



At the regional level, rapprochement with Iran or its allies also rates negatively. The majority (58%) of Egyptians disapprove of “the

Saudi-Iran diplomatic talks about some understandings between them.” A larger majority (65%)—once again privately defying the Egyptian government’s latest official position—likewise predict negative effects from “the moves by some Arab governments to restore relations with (Syrian president) Assad.” By comparison, a narrow plurality (49%) of Egyptians expect “the gradual steps to improve Arab relations with Turkey” to have a positive regional impact; while not quite as many (40%) dispute that view.

### **Normalization with Israel Gets Very Little Support, But Some Changes Register**

Notably, the percentage of Egyptians with a positive view of Israel’s new peace accords with other Arab countries has declined over the past year, from 25% in November 2020 to just 12% today. This may reflect the lingering impact of the May 2021 war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza and concomitant violence around the Holy Places in Jerusalem, both of which got typically heavy-handed coverage on Egyptian media. That very low proportion of support also applies to other questions about normalization with Israel: only 12% of Egyptians supported “sports or business contacts with Israelis,” and only 13% supported “the recent conference in Erbil, Iraq that called for peace with Israel.”

On a somewhat brighter note, around a quarter of Egyptians voice a favorable opinion about “the replacement of Netanyahu as Israel’s prime minister.” About the same percentage also say “recent economic deals between Israel, Egypt and Jordan” will have a positive impact on the region. Because both of these developments are likely to last, at least for a while, such indicators of potential attitudinal changes will be well worth watching in the coming year. ❖

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