

Arab Public Opinion on Arab-Israeli Normalization and Abraham Accords

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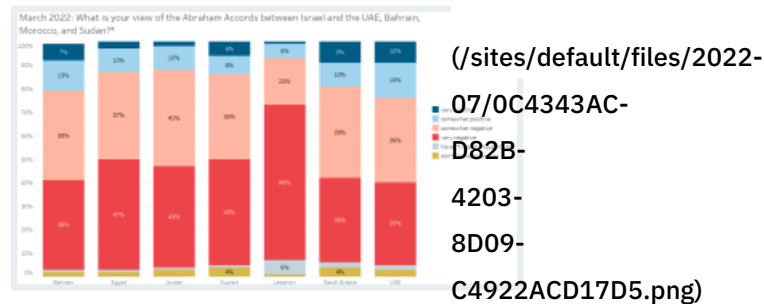
Brief Analysis

A recent poll indicates that though more Gulfis now disapprove of the Abraham Accords, undertones of warming sentiments towards allowing contacts with Israelis are also present.

The wave of Arab countries officially normalizing relations with Israel over the past several years stands in contrast with a growing lack of public support for the Abraham Accords in the Gulf. New public opinion polling from the Washington Institute (TWI) demonstrates that the percentage of those who view them favorably in Saudi Arabia (KSA), Bahrain, and the UAE has dropped over the past year to a minority view. However, this data also indicates a countercurrent of openness to allowing business and social ties with Israelis in some parts of the Gulf, especially in comparison to their peers in Egypt, Kuwait, and the Levant. As Biden will purportedly push for the Saudi Kingdom to take steps to normalize ties with Israel during his visit, it is a potentially optimistic sign for the administration that 40 percent of Saudis now agree that informal business or sports ties with Israelis should be allowed.

The official publicity surrounding the Abraham Accords—along with more recent signaling of Saudi willingness to make certain agreements with Israel—has served both as a sign to Tehran of the increased fortitude of the “anti-Iranian” coalition and to Washington of the willingness of Arab allies to “play ball” with the American policy agenda. Nevertheless, TWI polling from March 2022 demonstrates that more than two thirds of citizens in Bahrain, KSA, and UAE view the Abraham Accords unfavorably less than two years out.

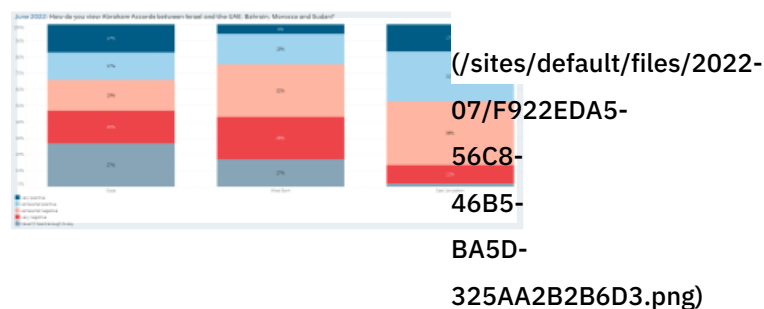
Current attitudes contrast with the relative optimism exhibited by a significant percentage of Emiratis, Bahrainis, Saudis, and even some Egyptians in the months after the announcement of the Abraham Accords. When first polled in November 2020, attitudes in the UAE and Bahrain were effectively split as to whether they saw the agreement in a positive or negative light. Apart from the people of the signatory countries, 40 percent of Saudis and Qataris then also supported the Accords. Now, the percentage of those who see the agreement in a positive light hover between 19% to 25% in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE.



To explore this data and more, access TWI's interactive public opinion poll database [here](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/twi-interactive-polling-platform) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/twi-interactive-polling-platform>).

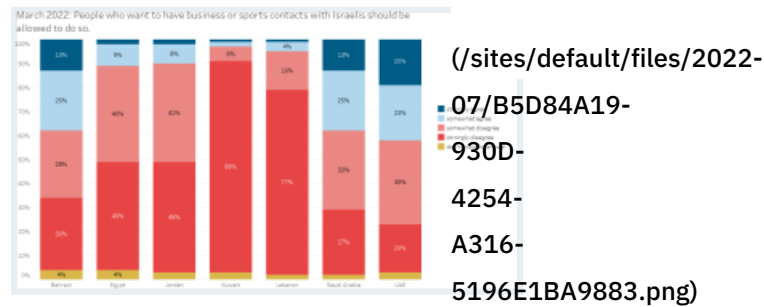
Likewise, attitudes have hardened in countries where the Abraham Accords were initially unpopular. The percentage of those in Lebanon who see them in a “very negative” light has increased from 41% in November 2020 to 66% this March, while support in Egypt has dropped from about a quarter to 13%. Of all countries polled, attitudes in Jordan have evinced the least amount of change, with support hovering around 12% since 2020. These attitudes do not differ significantly across demographic splits by age or religion.

It is striking that of all the Arab populations polled in the past few months, Palestinians are in fact the least likely to express a negative viewpoint of the Abraham Accords. When asked in June 2022, a full half (48%) of East Jerusalemites said they viewed the Abraham Accords in at least a somewhat positive light. 58% of West Bankers and just 39% of Gazans expressed negative opinions on the matter—fewer by far even than the 71% of Emiratis. Namely, this is because a significant minority of Palestinians remain undecided on the issue: 17% of West Bankers and 27% of Gazans report that they “haven’t heard enough” to answer the question.



In contrast, opinions regarding sub-state business and sports relations with Israelis have become more varied across the Arab world. Specifically, there appears to be a significant and sustained shift in public opinion within some Gulf countries stemming from this period. When first polled in July 2020, just months prior to the September 15 announcement, attitudes more or less aligned between the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Jordan. In all populations, at least 80 percent rejected such a proposal. A further 50% of Saudis and 47% of Emiratis strongly disagreed with allowing such ties. Support for such a proposal in these two countries jumped in the aftermath of the Abraham Accords and has remained effectively stable since November 2020. With the exception of Kuwait, disapproval rates of allowing business or sports ties with Israelis now edge closer to half (Bahrain – 58%, KSA – 60%, UAE – 55%). Earlier polling in Qatar from November 2021 suggests its population is similarly split on the question. Moreover, support is trending incrementally upwards in some cases— inching up in the UAE by about six points from

July 2021 to March 2022, with 43 percent now supporting the proposition.



By contrast, opposition to allowing business or sports ties with Israelis remains at 85% in Egypt and 87% in Jordan despite longstanding official relations. Countries lacking any relations with Israel—formal or otherwise—are even more vehemently opposed. 94% of Kuwaitis and 93% of Lebanese surveyed disagreed with the notion—and a further 77% of Lebanese and 88% of Kuwaitis strongly reject it. In contrast to most Gulf countries, more Lebanese and Kuwaitis disagree with allowing such contacts than see the Abraham Accords negatively.

Notably, a majority in the Palestinian territories express openness to some form of contact with Israelis—60% of West Bankers, 62% of Gazans, and 84% of East Jerusalemites agree that Palestinians should encourage “direct personal contacts and dialogue with Israelis, in order to help the Israeli peace camp advocate a just solution” to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

With Biden arriving in Israel, these polls suggest that normalization has had a mixed impact on public opinion. The scope of the Accords may have ultimately disappointed many of those Gulfis who had initially seen them in a potentially positive light. Nevertheless, their existence appears to have shifted attitudes in some parts of the Gulf towards unofficial ties with Israelis, potentially opening the door for further informal contacts. ❖

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