

How Middle East Societies Grapple with War

by [Yonit Levi \(/experts/yonit-levi\)](#), [Nadim Koteich \(/experts/nadim-koteich\)](#), [Amer Al Sabaileh \(/experts/amer-al-sabaileh\)](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Yonit Levi \(/experts/yonit-levi\)](#)

Yonit Levi is chief news anchor for Israel's Channel 12.



[Nadim Koteich \(/experts/nadim-koteich\)](#)

Nadim Koteich is a columnist at Asharq al-Aswat and former general manager of Sky News Arabia.



[Amer Al Sabaileh \(/experts/amer-al-sabaileh\)](#)

Amer Al Sabaileh is a Jordanian professor and columnist for Jordan Times and al-Ghad.



Brief Analysis

A trio of leading regional journalists discuss how Emiratis, Israelis, and Jordanians are weathering the Iran crisis, what outcomes they are rooting for, and how their relations with Washington and each other might evolve as a result.

On March 24, The Washington Institute held a virtual Policy Forum with Yonit Levi, Nadim Koteich, and Amer Al Sabaileh. Levi is chief news anchor for Israel's Channel 12. Koteich is a columnist for Asharq al-Awsat and former general manager at Sky News Arabia. Sabaileh is a columnist for the Jordan Times and al-Ghad.

Note: The following is a rapporteurs' summary of the speakers' remarks and should not be cited or quoted in their name.

Yonit Levi

The Israeli home front has responded to the Iran war with a combination of resilience, toughness, and tension. Israelis have endured twenty-five days of constant sirens, trips to the bomb shelters, little sleep, no school, and overall life disruption, with little end in sight. Nevertheless, most Israelis understand the necessity of absorbing the pressure of this war. According to recent Channel 12 polling, 66 percent of them are satisfied with the way the government is managing the war—significantly higher than public support for the current government coalition itself. There is no doubt that Israelis unite in times of war and, by and large, support the goal of dismantling the Iranian threat, despite the heavy costs to the home front.

Optimally, Israelis hope that the war's end will include regime change in Tehran, so that Iran no longer poses an existential threat to them or the wider region. Yet even if a lesser outcome emerges—such as setting Iran's nuclear weapons program back by many, many years and substantially degrading its ballistic missile capabilities—Israelis will generally view this as success. Moreover, many sense that the war may open opportunities for enhancing regional relationships with Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, which has shared with Israel the experience of being targeted by Iranian attacks.

The Lebanon front is a more complicated story. Israelis believed they had achieved success there in late 2024, when a ceasefire was reached and the Lebanese government committed to disarming Hezbollah. Clearly, the problem was not solved. Israelis understand the importance of what needs to be done there given how close that front is to their communities, and how much shorter the warning time is for missile attacks from Lebanon.

Looking at Israel in a broader sense, one can see a striking continuity. During a turbulent six-year period that has seen the COVID-19 pandemic, mass protests over judicial reform, and near-nonstop warfare following the October 7 attacks, a single issue has dominated Israeli politics: clashing views about the leadership of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Even if political leaders put their differences aside during the war, that basic issue will reemerge when Israel holds national elections later this year.

Nadim Koteich

Many Emiratis believe that the experience of the past three weeks has vindicated their principled view that Iran specifically—and political Islam more generally—is their main adversary. They will emerge from the war more committed than ever to confronting this threat and seeking partnership with the United States and Israel in that effort.

The Emirati home front is not accustomed to or equipped for Iran's relentless missile and drone attacks. Indeed, one should not dismiss the powerful psychological impact afforded by sharing the experience of Iranian aggression with Israelis. As the UAE bears the brunt of Iranian retaliation, Emirati officials have dramatically changed their rhetoric toward Iran, explicitly calling it an "enemy state." Even so, they will remain in a defensive posture and avoid engaging in offensive operations against Iran, which would only complicate the UAE's strategic situation.

President Muhammad bin Zayed has displayed strong leadership through his public appearances during the war, from visiting Dubai Mall to spending time with attack victims in the hospital. These actions reassured an Emirati populace looking to him for consolation and guidance.

Emirati priorities in the war's endgame are threefold: first, to make sure Iran is contained and unable to project power in the region; second, to prevent a descent to chaos and instability in Iran that would pose a risk to Emirati national security; and third, to configure a postwar architecture in which Washington both recognizes the ongoing threat that political Islam poses to regional stability and acknowledges that regional stakeholders should have their views considered and prioritized. The UAE will double down on its strategic partnership with the United States after the war, recognizing that partnership with Washington is a foundational, indispensable element of Emirati national security.

Amer Al Sabaileh

Jordan's military is determined to defend against the Iranian threat, having been the target of more than 250 drones and missiles in recent weeks. Jordan has successfully intercepted the vast majority of these Iranian projectiles, and its populace has exhibited striking resilience.

On a deeper level, widespread confusion persists about what direction Jordanian national politics will take after this conflict. This moment of danger gives political leaders an opportunity to form a new national dialogue that prioritizes domestic issues and enhances the Jordanian national identity. For too long, the kingdom has been caught up in regional issues unrelated to its numerous internal problems or the daily

lives and challenges of the Jordanian people. The country would benefit from a more realpolitik approach, prioritizing internal problems that affect people's lives over regional issues that affect people's emotions.

Although Jordanians and Israelis are both being targeted by Iranian missiles, no one should expect this shared experience to soften Jordanian attitudes toward Israel, which remain very cold more than thirty years after the peace treaty. There may be unanimity over Jordan's need to counter actors—including Iran—who seek to sow dissension inside the kingdom and smuggle drugs and weapons across its borders. Yet this will not translate into a warmer view of Israel. In fact, the critical tone toward Israel will likely keep growing among the political elite and wider population—a product of the deeply entrenched Islamic movement in Jordan, out of which Hamas grew. Addressing this will take a concerted effort by Jordan's leadership to shift the country in a new direction, emphasizing Jordanian national identity over the Islamist identity that has been allowed to grow in recent decades.

This summary was prepared by Nava Goldstein, Zack Apt, and Gabriel Wein. The Policy Forum series is made possible through the generosity of the Winkler Lowy Foundation. ❖

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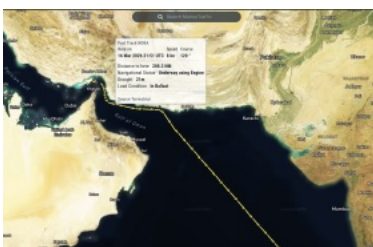
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