

# Iran Protests: Mild Arab Official Reactions, Strong Public Ire at Iran

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Brief Analysis

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As street protests persist against the regime in Iran, Arab official reaction so far has been surprisingly restrained. Typically, a prominent op-ed this week by Abdul Rahman al-Rashed in the flagship Saudi media website, Al-Arabiya, urged not regime change but merely policy changes in Tehran.

This reticence may reflect Arab establishment fears of “contagious” popular protests leading to a recurrence of the mostly ill-fated Arab Spring, which followed Iran’s mid-2009 Green Movement uprising by little over a year. It may also signal understandable uncertainty about the trajectory of Iran’s current unrest. Most of all, however, official Arab caution probably stems from fears of Iranian reprisals for any gloating or meddling during this crisis.

Nevertheless, behind this diffident public approach, most Arab rulers can rest assured that their people harbor almost no sympathy for Iran’s regime. On the contrary; two separate sets of surveys conducted late last year, by the Washington Institute and by Zogby International, show very widespread Arab popular dislike of Iran’s government—both overall and in relation to its specific regional policies and proxies, so new US steps against Iran’s regime would have wide popular Arab support. The only major exceptions to this rule are the two million or so Shia citizens of Lebanon, and the 400,000 or so of Bahrain, who generally voice very favorable views of their fellow Shia political leaders, whether inside or outside Iran.

Views of Iran’s “current policies in the region” are overwhelmingly negative in most Arab countries I recently polled by for the Washington Institute. This includes 80 to 90-plus percent of the public in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the UAE. Notably, in the latter three countries, even among their Shia minorities, fewer than half express a favorable view of Iranian policy.

By contrast, in Lebanon and Bahrain, where Shia Arabs comprise a plurality or majority of the total native population, views of Iran’s policies are much more heavily polarized by sect. In Lebanon, 82 percent of the Shia, but just 7 percent of the Sunnis, say they approve those policies; among Christians, that figure is roughly in the middle, at 37 percent. In Bahrain, similarly, positive views of Iran’s regional behavior characterize 68 percent of the Shia,

compared with a mere 2 percent of the Sunnis in that small but strategic island country.

Remarkably, majority Arab popular opposition to Iran extends even to approving the possibility of forming an alliance with Israel against that common enemy. Last September, the Zogby poll, which no one can reasonably accuse of pro-Israel bias, asked six different Arab publics about “an alliance between Israel and Arab governments... in fighting extremism and combating Iran’s regional interference.” In Egypt, 59 percent said this would be “desirable,” if Israel were to implement the Arab Peace Initiative and end its occupation of Palestinian lands,” implementing the Arab Peace Initiative. In Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and even Iraq, half the public seconded this opinion. The proportions were only modestly lower in the other two countries polled: Lebanon, 40 percent; and Jordan, 35 percent.

Attitudes about specific Iranian policies toward Syria and Iraq are also widely negative, according to the latest Zogby poll. A solid majority in Jordan, and overwhelming majorities in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, say they disapprove of Iran’s role in both Syria and Iraq. Most interesting, though, is that Iraqis themselves predominantly oppose Iran’s role in their own country, by a margin of 46 to 36 percent. And they oppose Iran’s role in Syria by an even larger margin: 55 to 22 percent.

Views in the Gulf regarding other Iranian policies, and the desired U.S. response to them, are also particularly noteworthy. Concerning the intra-Arab dispute with Qatar, the Washington Institute poll shows majorities in Saudi Arabia and the UAE—and even in Qatar itself—agreeing that “the most important thing in this situation is to find the maximum degree of Arab cooperation against Iran.” And asked to pick their top priority for U.S. foreign policy, a plurality of both Saudis and Emiratis select “increase its practical opposition to Iran’s regional influence and activities.” They put that goal ahead all the other issues listed: Palestine, Yemen, counterterrorism, or just reducing U.S. interference in the region.

Overall Arab popular attitudes toward two of Iran’s major regional allies, Hezbollah and the Houthis in Yemen, are equally negative, as measured again in the Washington Institute survey. In Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, and Bahrain, 80 to 90 percent say they disapprove of both those movements. In the latter two countries, significantly, this negative view is predominantly shared among Shia citizens as well. Only in Lebanon do attitudes toward Iran’s local proxy reflect this sectarian cleavage: 88 percent of Lebanese Shia say they approve of Hezbollah; while about the same stunningly high proportion of the country’s Sunnis, 85 percent, say they disapprove of it.

Methodologically, both the Washington Institute’s and these Zogby surveys comprised face-to-face, private interviews with representative national samples of approximately 1,000 respondents in each country. The Washington Institute survey employed a standard, multi-stage stratified geographic probability sampling method. The Zogby poll, according to its public presentation by James Zogby, used a somewhat less reliable quota-assisted sampling technique. Full methodological details for the Washington Institute poll are available from the author on request. ❖

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