

# What Arabs Really Think About Iran

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

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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

David Pollock is the Bernstein Fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on regional political dynamics and related issues.



## Articles & Testimony

It is no secret that Arab public opinion toward U.S. President Barack Obama has soured since his June 2009 speech in Cairo, Egypt. According to a slew of recent opinion polls, Arabs have been deeply disappointed with Obama's accommodations to Israel. Analysts have suggested that this discontent has caused Arabs to embrace Iran and its nuclear program, and are hostile to U.S.-led attempts to isolate and pressure the Islamic Republic. But on this front, the numbers tell a very different story.

Prof. Shibley Telhami, for example, contended that Arab opinion is "shifting toward a positive perception of Iran's nuclear program." Telhami, who is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and a prominent analyst of Middle Eastern public opinion, asserts that Arab publics even have sanguine views about the consequences for the region if Iran was to develop a nuclear weapon.

But since last autumn, when Obama reached a public compromise with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on the hot-button issue of Israeli settlements, a number of different polls have measured Arab attitudes toward Iran. In every case but one, these surveys have consistently demonstrated heavily negative views of Iran, its nuclear program, and of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The mistake of Telhami, and other analysts, is to rely on a single 2010 Zogby poll to make their judgement, rather than considering the full range of polling on the issue.

The Zogby poll, which was conducted from June 29 to July 20, found that 58 percent of those surveyed in six Arab countries -- Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Morocco, and the United Arab Emirates -- believe that Iran is "trying to develop nuclear weapons," not "conducting research for peaceful purposes." This was exactly the same result as last year's Zogby's poll, but the 2010 survey reported an astonishing 50-point net shift on a related question: whether Iranian nuclear weapons would have a positive or negative effect on the Middle East. A year ago, 46 percent of those surveyed believed that the effect would be negative and 21 percent believed it would be positive; this year's poll found that 57 percent thought the result would be positive versus 29 percent who responded that Iran's possession of nuclear weapons would have a negative effect on the region.

Much of this shift is attributed to Egypt, where an amazing 69 percent of respondents, even among those who doubt Iran's professions of peaceful intent, still reportedly claimed that Iran's possession of nuclear weapons would be a good thing for the region.

There is no persuasive explanation why these numbers shifted so greatly over the past year -- or why they differ so greatly from those reported in every other published Arab poll over this same period. And there are many underlying reasons why a large percentage of Arabs might fear, resent, or just generally dislike Iran: the Sunni-Shiite sectarian split, along with intra-Shiite divisions; the historic and ethnic Arab-Persian cleavage; opposition to Iranian subversion, terrorism, or occupation in Iraq, Lebanon, and most Persian Gulf states; and, especially in the past year, disgust with Iran's brutal dictatorship, and disapproval of Ahmadinejad's condescending and hypocritical attitude toward Arabs and Arab causes. Given the lack of any convincing explanation for the near-seismic shift that Zogby reports, this poll must be considered an unreliable outlier unless some compelling new supporting evidence emerges.

The Zogby poll's findings are even more peculiar given that a Pew Global Attitudes Project Survey asked very similar questions in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon a mere two months earlier, and reached very different results. In the Pew poll, solid majorities in all three Arab countries reported unfavorable views of Iran: Egypt, 66 percent; Jordan, 63 percent; Lebanon, 60 percent. Views of Ahmadinejad were even more negative: Among Egyptians, 72 percent said they had little or no confidence in him; 66 percent of respondents in Jordan and 63 percent in Lebanon said the same.

The Pew poll also found predominantly negative opinions toward Iran's nuclear program in all three Arab societies, not to mention the other predominantly Muslim countries surveyed in the poll. In Egypt and Lebanon, two-thirds opposed the prospect of Iran's acquiring nuclear weapons; Jordanians felt the same way, but only by bare majority (53 percent vs. 39 percent). In all three countries, support within those majorities ranged from 66 to 72 percent in favor of tougher economic sanctions against Iran. In Egypt and Jordan, among the majority that opposed Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons, those surveyed also believed by wide margins that it was more important to succeed in thwarting this possibility than to avoid a military conflict.

It's not just Pew that has found consistently negative Arab public attitudes toward Iran. In November 2009, Pechter Middle East Polls (to whom I am an advisor), partnered with an Arab research firm to survey Egyptians and Saudis on the subject. They found that a solid majority (57 percent) of Saudis favored tougher sanctions against Iran if it did not "accept new limits on its nuclear program." A third even said they would approve "an American military strike against the Iranian nuclear facilities" -- and a quarter said the same about an Israeli military strike.

Egyptians were considerably less hawkish on Iran. However, the Pechter poll found that they were still split roughly down the middle on sanctions, with 43 percent of those surveyed saying that they wanted a tougher sanctions regime against the country. Only one-quarter of Egyptian respondents said they would back U.S. military action against Iran's nuclear program, while even fewer (17 percent) approved an Israeli attack.

It's no surprise that Saudis, who live in closer geographical proximity to Iran, were more supportive of aggressive action to roll back the Islamic Republic's influence. Indeed, the Pechter poll's findings are broadly in line with another November 2009 poll, conducted by the Doha Debates and YouGov/Siraj. That poll was limited to a segment of mostly (80 percent) male online users. Still, it was a representative sample from a regional online panel of more than 200,000 otherwise diverse individuals. As such, the results are indicative of sentiment among an important, attentive public in the gulf states.

This survey found that an overwhelming majority (83 percent) of this Arab public in the gulf believed that Iran was planning to build nuclear weapons, despite its claims of peaceful intent. Even more strikingly, just over half (53 percent) agreed with the statement that "Iran would launch a nuclear attack on another country or group if it did acquire nuclear weapons." And by a three-to-one margin, those who said that Iran would use its nuclear weapons believed that the Islamic Republic's target would be Saudi Arabia or another gulf country, not Israel. Accordingly, only a little over a third (37 percent) thought Iranian nuclear weapons would offer the region a "balance of power."

More intriguing findings come from a key country that has not been included in any of the standard "Arab world" surveys: Iraq. An April 2010 Pechter poll, conducted by a leading local research institute, sought to remedy this glaring gap, with eye-opening results: Among Iraq's Sunni Arabs and Kurds, two-thirds disapproved of Iran's ties with Iraqi political leaders. A solid majority disapproved not only of Ahmadinejad, but also of his statements denying the Holocaust. Even more surprisingly, a mere 17 percent of Iraqi Shiites viewed Ahmadinejad favorably. Most tellingly of all, 43 percent of Iraqi Shiites said they held a negative opinion of Iranian ties with Iraqi political figures, with just 18 percent viewing such ties positively.

So the overall scorecard reads as follows: Since November 2009, four independent, credible polls have shown heavily negative Arab views of Iran, Ahmadinejad, and Iran's nuclear program. Only one poll reported relatively positive views. Arabs may be disillusioned with Obama, but if they object to the United States taking a harder line toward the Islamic Republic, they sure aren't telling the pollsters.

David Pollock is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute for Near East Policy and author of [Actions, Not Just Attitudes: A New Paradigm for U.S.-Arab Relations \(/templateC04.php?CID=331\)](#) (2010). From 1987 to 1995, he was the branch chief for Near East/South Asia/Africa survey research at the U.S. Information Agency, and then served in several State Department advisory positions from 1996 to 2007. ❖

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