

Forty Percent of Saudis and Emiratis Still Accept Israeli Contacts, Even Under Netanyahu

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Brief Analysis

Approval for contacts with Israelis remained steady through 2022, even as hesitancy on Abraham Accords continued.

Two rare, reliable new public opinion polls commissioned by The Washington Institute of citizens in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in late November 2022—when it was clear that Binyamin Netanyahu would once again become Israel’s prime minister—show that popular acceptance of allowing contacts with Israelis is holding steady at just over 40% in both states. These results are all the more surprising, as around 90% of those two publics also say that Netanyahu’s election would have negative regional effects.

In fact, that level of Saudi and Emirati popular acceptance for contacts with Israelis has remained stable since a comparable survey in November 2020, soon after the Abraham Accords were announced. A positive view of contacts roughly doubled compared to findings from another survey conducted shortly before the Accords were made public. Subsequently, tensions on the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif and the May 2021 war between Israel and Hamas in Gaza had no apparent effect on this higher level of public support according to polls taken just a few weeks later.

It now appears that Netanyahu’s return to power, highly unpopular as that is among these Gulf Arab publics, does not alter this pattern. In addition, findings from a parallel survey conducted in Bahrain in July 2022 are remarkably similar, with 37% of Bahrainis also voicing acceptance of allowing Israeli contacts. Even in Qatar, which has not joined the Abraham Accords, the most recent available data (November 2021) reveal an almost identical level of popular acceptance of Israeli contacts among its citizens.

The logical conclusion is that this aspect of normalization with Israel has itself become relatively “normalized” among most Gulf Arab publics—even as a slim majority in each country remains privately at least “somewhat” opposed to it. The figures are similar and steady over the past three years, regardless of formal inclusion or

exclusion from the Abraham Accords, political changes in Israel, or tensions on the ground in the Palestinian arena.

More than Half of the Palestinian Public Has Also Been Open to Some Israeli Contacts

Also noteworthy in this connection is that among the Palestinians themselves, the most recent available hard survey data (June 2022) show an even higher proportion—at least 60% of each subgroup—approving certain contacts with Israelis. In this case, a West Bank/Gaza/East Jerusalem poll conducted by a local independent Palestinian pollster asked about encouraging “direct personal contacts and dialogue with Israelis, in order to help the Israeli peace camp advocate a just solution.” At the time, a surprising 48% of East Jerusalem Palestinians also expressed a positive view of the Abraham Accords themselves, though only around half as many Gazans or West Bankers agreed with that assessment.

Views on Contact with Israelis Differ from Views on Full Diplomatic Normalization

This distinction in the Arab popular consciousness between contacts with Israelis and formal peace agreements with Israel is a significant characteristic of public opinion in the Gulf as well. In Saudi Arabia and the UAE, for instance, the most recent survey shows that only around 20% of each public says the Abraham Accords will have “a positive effect on the region.” When those Accords were first announced, by contrast, an initial burst of optimism yielded corresponding figures of around 40% positive views among both those publics.

Majority of Lebanese Endorse Maritime Deal with Israel—But Not Personal Contacts

A different distinction emerges, surprisingly, in Lebanon, where the November 2022 survey series asked both about contacts with Israelis and about Lebanon’s own new maritime boundary accord with the neighboring Jewish state. The overwhelming majority of Lebanese—whether Shia, Sunnis, Christians, or Druze—say they reject contacts with Israelis, which are outlawed and indeed prosecuted by their government. Yet the majority overall (61%) also voiced a favorable view of the maritime deal with Israel. That proportion of support for the deal is much higher than in any of the other three Arab countries polled in this November 2022 wave.

Just Ten Percent in Egypt or Jordan Approve Israeli Contacts, Despite Decades of Formal Peace

In these latest polls, Egypt also stands out strongly from its Gulf Arab cousins in terms of popular rejection of contacts with Israelis. Even after 45 years of official peace with Israel, a mere 10% of Egyptians today say that “people who want to have business or sports contacts with Israelis should be allowed to do so.” That percentage has barely budged since the question was first posed in July 2020, whatever the state of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process or any other discernible variable.

This attitude is most likely both cause and consequence of Egyptian government policy during most of those long decades. That policy can best be described as follows: secret security cooperation with Israel—alongside ferociously negative, state-guided media coverage and commentary on almost everything Israeli, plus intense harassment of most Egyptians, except for a few government-approved economic managers, who engage personally with any Israelis.

In this respect, Jordan follows closely in Egypt’s footsteps. Jordan signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1994, and the two countries have worked closely together ever since on border security and even on certain issues related to the Temple Mount/al-Haram al-Sharif, and lately also on energy and water projects. Nevertheless, the percentage of Jordanian citizens in every recent survey who say they accept contacts with Israelis also hovers consistently at the strikingly low level of approximately 10%. Jordanian officials sometimes privately acknowledge that this dichotomy presents a problem, although there is little evidence that they intend to correct it.

Methodological Note

This analysis is based on face-to-face surveys conducted among representative samples of around 1,000 citizens in

each country, selected according to standard geographical probability procedures. In the 2022 West Bank/Gaza/East Jerusalem poll, the sample size was 1,315 Palestinian adults (age 18+) residing in the three territories. The surveys were conducted by highly experienced, technically qualified, and entirely apolitical regional commercial survey research companies. Strict quality controls, health safety protocols, and assurances of confidentiality are provided throughout the fieldwork.

The author has personally organized and supervised the conduct of these surveys, without ever in any way interfering in the sampling, interviewing, or other aspects of the research. The statistical margin of error for samples of this size and nature is approximately 3 percentage points. Additional details, including full questionnaires, results, demographic distributions, and other pertinent information, are readily available on our [interactive polling platform \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/twi-interactive-polling-platform\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/twi-interactive-polling-platform). ❖

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