

New Kuwait Poll Shows Little Interest in Protests Despite Deadlock, Split Views of Global Powers

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Brief Analysis

In a new public opinion poll commissioned by The Washington Institute and conducted in March-April by an independent regional firm, Kuwaitis appeared averse to any disruptions at home or around the region, even as tensions grow across Kuwait's political scene.

When asked about their perceptions of China, Russia, and the United States, pluralities—or a majority in the case of China—labeled the powers as economic or security partners, while Iran was labeled a competitor or enemy. Nevertheless, respondents did not appear to favor action against Iran. On relations with Israel, negative views of the Abraham Accords and economic ties with Israelis remained, though Kuwaitis largely rejected the idea of Hamas missile launches into Israel.

After Years of Political Flip-Flopping, Kuwaitis Reject Protests

In April, a new royal decree appointed yet another government in Kuwait, making it the seventh cabinet in three years. A month earlier, the parliament elected in September 2022 was dissolved by the constitutional court and replaced by the previous parliament of 2020—initially dissolved by the Crown Prince last August. Now, Kuwaitis can expect even more parliamentary turnover. The Crown Prince has once again dissolved the 2020 parliament and set new elections for early June, promising to once again “correct the course” of parliament, as he did during the September 2022 elections.

Although far fewer candidates have registered for the June elections than in years past—likely a consequence of widespread political disillusionment—Kuwaiti respondents did not appear eager to take any frustrations to the streets. In fact, in the latest polling, 79% agreed at least somewhat with the following statement: “It's a good thing we

aren't having mass street protests against corruption, as in some other Arab countries”—a percentage statistically equivalent to when last polled in March 2022. This includes Kuwait’s sizable Shia minority, with nearly two-thirds of Shia respondents somewhat or strongly agreeing.

In contrast, Shia Kuwaitis diverge considerably from their Sunni counterparts when it comes to the idea of listening to “moderate, tolerant, and modern” interpretations of Islam. Consistent with past results, 51% of Shia respondents in this most recent poll agreed at least somewhat that we should listen to these interpretations, while 46% disagreed. On the other hand, only 34% of Sunni respondents agreed with the statement while 64% disagreed.

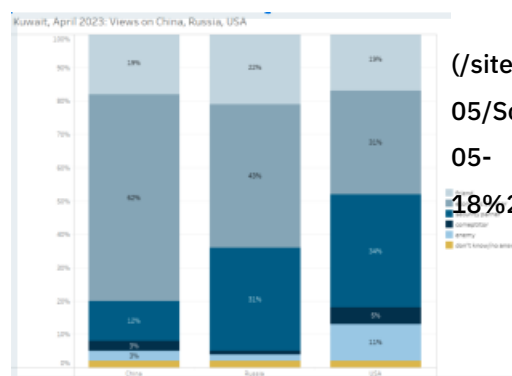
China Is Decidedly an Economic Partner; Roles of Russia and the United States Are Less Precise

Given the option between five different characterizations—a friend of our country, a security partner, an economic partner, a competitor, or an enemy of our country—a majority (62%) of Kuwaiti respondents agreed that China was an economic partner, followed distantly by 19% who felt China was a friend.

This clear-cut perception of China’s economic prominence stands in contrast to perceptions of Russia and the United States, although majorities still viewed these two countries as a partner of some sort. On Russia, 43% of respondents stated the country was an economic partner while 31% viewed the Kremlin as a security partner. Another 22% see Russia as a friend. This relatively positive appraisal of Russian relations is likewise reflected in recent Kuwaiti opinions on the war in Ukraine.

In fact, roughly three-quarters of Kuwaiti respondents agreed at least somewhat with the following statement: “In the war going on now between Russia and Ukraine, the best outcome would be a Russian victory, including the annexation of significant Ukrainian territory to Russia.” This response seems to suggest a shift from the attitudes in the first month of the war. When polled in March 2022, 76% of Kuwaiti respondents thought Russia’s military actions in Ukraine were somewhat or very negative for the region, and 56% blamed the actions for an increase in food prices.

Kuwaiti attitudes towards the United States were even more split—34% viewed the country principally as a security partner and 31% as an economic partner. Yet 11% of respondents said the United States was an enemy, compared to just 2-3% who said the same about Russia or China. When asked what the United States’ top priority should be in the region, one-third of respondents said the country should “do more to help resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict,” while 25% believed the United States should “do more to help counter the threats we face from Iran and its proxies.”



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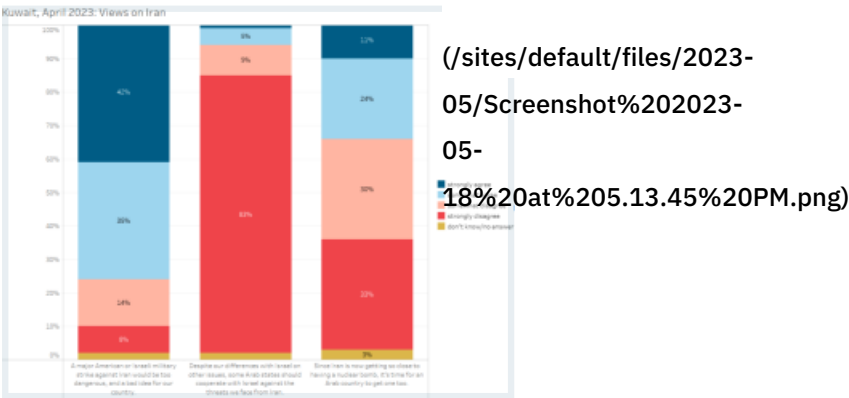
While Kuwaitis Dislike Iran, Action Against It is Unpopular

Forty percent of Kuwaiti respondents labeled Iran a “competitor,” while 38% said the country was an enemy. Even among Kuwait’s Shia minority, perceptions of Iran were largely negative—nearly two-thirds of Shia respondents said the country was a competitor or enemy.

Nevertheless, more than three-fourths (77%) of respondents agreed at least somewhat that “a major American or Israeli military strike against Iran would be too dangerous, and a bad idea for our country.” Likewise, 66% disagreed

with the idea of an Arab country obtaining a nuclear bomb in response to Iran’s progress towards a bomb.

Regarding the restoration of diplomatic ties between Saudi Arabia and Iran, respondents were a bit more divided, though a slight majority (58%) said the rapprochement was at least somewhat negative.



Public Opinion on Israel Remains Negative, But Surprises Emerge

Kuwaitis’ opinions of the Abraham Accords remained consistent with earlier attitudes polled in 2022, and consistently more negative than other Gulf countries polled—a mere 14% of respondents rated the establishment of formal relations between several Arab countries and Israel as a somewhat or very positive development for the region.

Likewise, 95% disagreed—89% strongly so—with the idea of business deals with Israeli companies, even if those deals would help Kuwait’s economy. Most respondents (92%) again disagreed at least somewhat with the idea of “cooperating with Israel” against Iranian threats, and 87% agreed at least somewhat with this intentionally weighty statement: “In case of an earthquake or other natural disaster, as we just saw in Syria and Turkey, Arab countries should refuse any humanitarian aid from Israel.”

Despite this large-scale rejection of normalization, Kuwaitis appeared more receptive to one example of tangible engagement with Israel and largely disapproved of Hamas attacks against it. When asked to assess the impact of the recent “agreement on a maritime boundary between Lebanon and Israel” on the region, 45% felt it was somewhat or very positive, while a slim majority (53%) said it was negative. More than two-thirds of respondents felt that Hamas rocket attacks against the Israeli state would be somewhat or very negative for the region.

Moreover, 65% of Kuwaitis thought that “the mass protests by some Israelis against the new Netanyahu government” were somewhat or very positive for the region. Although the reasons for this majority support are unclear, it largely echoes results from around the region.

Methodological Note

This analysis is based on findings from a survey among a representative, random national sample of 1,000 Kuwaiti citizens. Sample selection followed standard geographic probability procedures, yielding a statistical margin of error of approximately 3 percent. The survey was conducted by a highly qualified, experienced, and completely apolitical regional commercial firm. Strict quality controls and assurances of confidentiality were provided throughout. Additional details, including full question wording and data set with demographic breaks, are 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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