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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The elephant in the room. Change and Continuity in Arab public opinion on the Palestinian cause after October 7th

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ABSTRACT: Since the founding of the State of Israel in 1947, the Palestinian issue has always been a major concern for people in the Middle East and North Africa, a divisive factor among governments in the area, and a cause of political polarization. However, with the emergence of the Arab Uprisings in 2010-2011 and the consequent sectarianization of regional political alliances, the Palestinian issue seemed to have lost its centrality, with some Arab countries increasingly inclined toward the recognition of the State of Israel and normalization of relations. On October 7, 2023, the Hamas-led attacks and subsequent Israeli retaliation brought the issue back to the center of regional and international debate, provoking outrage among citizens across the region and calling normalization processes back into question, demonstrating that the issue, dismissed at the elite-level, has not lost its relevance for the Arab public. How has Arab public opinion on the Palestinian issue changed in the years since the Arab Uprisings, and how has it changed since the October 7 attacks? Through a longitudinal analysis of the Arab Opinion Index, three interesting elements emerge. First, although in the period between 2011 and 2023 the Palestinian cause continued to be considered a regional and Arab cause rather than a national and Palestinian one by the majority of public opinion, that majority dramatically increased after Israeli retaliation, especially in the countries most likely to normalize relations with Israel. Second, public opinion continues to be overwhelmingly opposed to recognition of the state of Israel, but this figure fell further after October 7, and is particularly steep in countries where approval of recognition of Israel was relatively more widespread. Third, while from 2011 to 2023 Israel was considered the greatest threat to stability and security in the region, after the October 7 retaliation that role is filled by the United States.

KEYWORDS: Public opinion, Palestinian cause, opinion polls, Israel, normalization

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1. Introduction

The Palestinian question has always been a contentious one in the Middle East and North Africa, and two regional cold wars and at least four international wars have been fought over it (Kerr, 1965; Valbjørn & Bank, 2012). However, with the sectarianization of the region along the Sunni-Shia due to the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the fall-out of the 2011 Arab Uprisings, the Palestinian question seemed to have lost its centrality both as a priority for the Arab states and as a significant mobilizing factor for public opinion. Furthermore, the growing regional threat from Iran pushed Israel and conservative Arab Sunni regimes to come closer contain their common enemy. The Abraham Accords of 2020, which embodied this new process of Arab-Israeli rapprochement, were welcomed as a definitive step towards pacifying Arab relations with Israel and fully integrating the Jewish state into the regional diplomatic system.

Nevertheless, with the 2023 Hamas-led attacks of October 7, hopes for a pacified region and a normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel collapsed, and the Palestinian question – ignored by the Arab regimes that had signed the Abraham Accords – has returned centerstage, suspending the ongoing wave of normalization. Several narratives – mostly Western – have been put forward to delegitimize the Palestinian claim to an sovereign state, push for the implementation and extension of the Abraham Accords, and ultimately divert attention from the deep-rooted and structural cause of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, namely the occupation. Among such narratives, we find the equation of Hamas with the Islamic State; the alleged growing lack of interest of Arab public opinion in the Palestinian issue; or the reduction of the current conflict to a proxy war launched by Iran. However, the outrage and mobilization at a popular level in reaction to Israeli brutality indicate that these narratives are not shared by Arab citizens, as Shaimaa Magued clearly demonstrates in her analysis of the Egyptian case in this special issue.

Given the authoritarian nature of political regimes in the region, political matters have long been considered as monopolized by and domestically unconstrained incumbents, giving the impression that it is of little use to take the Arab public into account as a variable that may have consequences on the decision-making processes and their outcomes. Nevertheless, in recent years, this assumption has been challenged in the emerging literature on constraints on foreign policy in authoritarian settings. As this scholarship suggests, although authoritarian regimes do not provide institutional channels that make incumbents accountable for their political decisions and are equipped with a wide range of repressive tools to silence political opposition, they still face domestic constraints that must be taken into account in the decision-making process to ensure a degree of political stability and, ultimately, the survival of the regime itself (Weeks, 2008; Weeks & Crunkilton, 2017; Cafiero, 2024). Among the domestic constraints identified in the literature, public opinion is of particular interest for the MENA region, where borders are particularly porous, non-state actors play a leading role both domestically and regionally, and where massive grassroots mobilization against authoritarian regimes has succeeded not only in subverting internal institutional structures but also in redefining the regional order. The 2011 Arab Uprisings have shown that the regime-society divide can have significant political repercussions, restoring to Arab public opinion a political agency and a role of influence over authoritarian incumbents now fearful of domestic dissent. With the new phase of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that began on October 7, 2023, and the return of the Palestinian question to the regional agenda, understanding the opinions of Arab citizens about related issues and the differences between countries offers a new perspective on the medium-long-term potential consequences of this latest round of violence in the region.

Based on data collected between 2011 and 2024 by the Arab Opinion Index and – to a lesser extent – by the Arab Barometer, this article has two objectives. First, to trace over time the opinions of Arab citizens regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and specifically the degree of identification with the Palestinian cause, the level

of opposition to the recognition of Israel, the opinion on Hamas and the leading international actors involved. Second, to weigh the impact that the October 7 attacks and its consequences had on these opinions compared to their trend in the previous phase.

2. The history of Arab-Israel relations and the changing role of the Palestinian issue

The history of relations between Israel and Arab countries can be roughly divided into four phases, two characterized by predominantly confrontational postures and two by a more conciliatory approach. In each phase, the Palestinian issue played different roles.

Starting from the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, the first phase is framed as an ideological conflict between pan-Arab anti-colonial nationalism and Zionism. Central to this frame was the non-recognition of the State of Israel by the Arab regimes. The principles that guided Arab-Israeli relations at this stage were essentially described in the 1967 Karthoum Declaration issued by the Arab League following the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula, the Golan Heights, and the West Bank and Jerusalem: no recognition, no negotiations, and no peace (Faheema, 2023). Relations between the Arab States and Israel were thus conceived as a zero-sum game: Arab opposition to Israel was absolute and expressed collectively through the Arab League and under the umbrella of pan-Arab interests. The decision-making margin of individual Arab regimes on the Palestinian question was restricted by the competitive interplay between them, centered on the popularity and reputation of individual leaders at the regional level as the primary factor to obtain the political legitimacy to represent the whole Arab community's interests. Grassroots regional solidarity with national liberation movements and, in particular, occupied Palestine could not be disappointed by compromising with an occupying foreign power, risking regional isolation, the loss of domestic consensus and soft power, and, ultimately, the fall of the regime itself, as the 1958 coup d'état in Iraq against the pro-Western Hashemite monarchy suggested (Shlaim, 2008).

However, the Arab coalition military defeat in 1967 represented a fatal blow to Pan-Arabism, thus shifting the regional balance of power (Campanini, 2014; Hinnebusch, 2017) and the foreign policy priorities of the Arab countries from the struggle for hegemony over the Arab world itself – of which the struggle for Palestinian self-determination was a crucial element – to the pursuit of specific national interests. The 1973 Yom Kippur War – which only involved Egypt and Syria – had as its objective the recovery of the territories occupied by Israel in the Six Day War, thus focusing on the pursuit of their own security and national interests rather than supporting Palestinian self-determination (Karawan, 1994; Kumaraswamy, 2009; Faheema, 2023). Indeed, by signing the 1979 US-sponsored Camp David Accords, Sadat's Egypt agreed to recognize Israel to regain its sovereignty over the Sinai Peninsula, thus prioritizing security and stability along the borders over the Palestinian issue (Rabinovich, 2009; Meital, 2013; Khawaja, 2013).

The normalization of relations between Egypt and Israel weakened the Palestinian question as a regional, ideological battleground for the definition of Arab interests (Bailey, 1990), widening the maneuverability of the elites in foreign policy choices. Furthermore, two new regional developments that took place in 1979 further fueled the shift of the Arab regimes' regional focus away from the Israeli occupation: the rise of Iran as a revisionist regional actor after the Khomeinist revolution, and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan followed by the international mobilization of the Islamist constellation and the call to jihad to defend it (Hoodbhoy, 2005; Campanini, 2014; Gause, 2015). In this changing context, the Palestinian question dropped down the list of priorities for Arab regimes, ushering in a phase of diversification of Arab states foreign policy towards Israel based on diverging national interests. The US adoption of a give-and-take approach – already shown to be

effective with Egypt – led to the 1993 Oslo Accords between the PLO and Israel and the 1994 Wadi Araba agreement between Jordan and Israel, which established full diplomatic relations between the two countries, defined their official international border, and recognized Jordan – which also obtains the cancellation of its debt to the United States – a special role over the holy sites of Jerusalem (Rubin, 1998; Faheema, 2023).

With the emergence of the Second Intifada in 2000 and Israeli brutal repression, the first wave of normalization came to an end. The Arab-Israeli relations entered a third phase, defined by progressive disengagement from the Palestinian question at the state level, and re-emergence of conflicts – led by non-state actors – at the social level. The new Intifada was the result of the betrayal of Palestinian expectations regarding the promise of a Palestinian state and the end of the occupation, the same guarantees theoretically bound to the normalization agreements signed by Egypt and Jordan and to their abandonment of the hardline position. However, the breach of the guarantees led to the purely symbolic withdrawal of the ambassadors by the two Arab regimes, without any real repercussions on the peace agreements, revealing to the public the marginality of the Palestinian issue compared to the other interests at stake in the treaties and showing their powerlessness that the rapprochement with Israel had partially caused. Even Saudi Arabia had a relatively weak reaction to the uprising and its repression. In 2002, as leader of the Arab League, it launched the Arab Peace Initiative, offering the normalization of relations between Arab states and Israel in exchange for Israel's withdrawal to its pre-1967 borders and a fair solution to the Palestinian refugee question (Faheema, 2023), reiterating the conditions already present in previous normalization processes, the non-respect of which had no particular consequences.

The post-Arab Uprisings regional stabilization and Iran's growing influence in the region laid the groundwork for a further rapprochement between the Arab regimes and Israel, leading to the fourth phase of Arab-Israeli relations, featured by a second wave of normalization, embodied by the 2020 US-sponsored Abraham Accords between Israel and Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates. Unlike the agreements of the first wave of normalization – which aimed to put an end to mutual security threats and to favor the emergence of an independent Palestinian state – the Abraham Accords lay the foundations for a broader integration process, focusing on shared national interests – restraining Iranian regional influence and initiating economic relations in strategic sectors – over the thorny Palestinian issue (Zweiri, 2021).

This overview shows that relations between Arab regimes and Israel have gone through phases of conflict and stagnation and phases of détente and compromise. On the one hand, during periods of hegemonic conflict and 'cold war', the Palestinian question emerged as a fundamental bone of contention in the struggle to gain regional legitimacy to represent the entire Arab community or the entire Muslim umma, attempting to convince regional public opinion of the superiority of one's approach over that of competitors in representing the interests of the Palestinians. On the other hand, periods in which new regional challenges emerged elsewhere or there were no open hegemonic efforts underway coincided with waves of normalization.

Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize aspects of the normalization waves concerning Arab regimes and Arab public opinion about the Palestinian issue. First, although the hostile position towards Israel significantly softened at the level of Arab political elites during the first wave, the Palestinian cause was not yet wholly overlooked at the elite level: both Egypt and Jordan anchored the peace process and official recognition of Israel to Tel Aviv's commitment – theoretically guaranteed by Washington – to favor the emergence of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state (Valbjørn et al., 2024). Instead, the second wave embodied by the Abraham Accords focuses exclusively on shared national interests – restraining Iranian regional influence and initiating economic relations in strategic sectors – completely overlooking the Palestinian issue (Zweiri, 2021). In both cases, though, the formalization of diplomatic relations with Israel has always been accompanied by additional political and economic concessions from the United States, signaling that normalization of relations

with Israel requires the satisfaction of other national interests to be implemented by the elites, at least to be able to present the agreements to a mainly Israel-hostile public as a pragmatic national necessity. In the first wave of normalization, the agreements with Israel, Egypt and Jordan guaranteed the anchoring to the Western Bloc and the United States, mitigating the risk of losing parts of the national territory in the war with Israel, safeguarding their national interests in the Palestinian territories and obtaining substantial economic concessions in return. In the second wave of normalization, both Sudan and Morocco obtained political concessions from the United States, which removed Sudan from the list of states sponsoring terrorism, which allowed for the lifting of international economic sanctions. Morocco obtained Washington's recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara.

Second, the change in policy of Arab regimes towards Israel should not be confused with a decline in the popularity of the Palestinian cause at the level of public opinion. During the first wave, the Arab public and domestic political opposition groups vehemently criticized the new course Egypt and Jordan undertook, causing the regimes' repressive response (Harlow, 1986; Ryan, 1998; Kornbluth, 2002; Schwedler, 2003; Clark, 2006, Clark, 2010) and causing high levels of political conflict between elites and society, leading for instance to the assassination of Egyptian President Sadat. During the second wave and especially after the attacks on October 2023, mass popular protests filled the streets despite the threat of repression and attempts at containment (Cafiero, 2024). Third, the hardline role on the Palestinian issue, abandoned by Arab regimes, has been quickly filled by Iran and non-state Islamist actors that represents it until today. The regional popularity achieved by Hezbollah after the war against Israel in 2006 suggests that, in the Arab political market, the demand for total opposition to Israel (and the US as well) was still high, bringing the Palestinian question back at the center of a renewed regional competition between the Arab Gulf States and the “Axis of Resistance” led by Iran. The popularity among domestic public opinion of those actors who proposed an uncompromising line towards Israel incompatible with the approach of the Arab Peace Initiative and the normalization agreements, revealed the growing gap between public opinion and the elites, favoring the reignition of a struggle for regional soft power similar to that of the Arab Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s, but with a predominant religious component, given the theocratic nature of the two competing regional leaders, Iran and Saudi Arabia. The emergence of a new regional hegemonic conflict with a strong sectarian component and the emergence of the Sunni-Shia divide (Solarz, 2020; Ardovini, 2022; Parkhomchuk & Sido, 2024) eroded the popularity of the hard-liner states in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the Palestinian issue taking the back seat again. However, the fact that Arab regimes moved closer to Israel with anti-Iranian purposes (Haklai & Rass, 2022) puts them in an uncomfortable position *vis-à-vis* their respective public opinions in the face of the new degeneration of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that began in October 2023.

With the revival of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the renewed salience of the Palestinian question, understanding Arab public opinion regarding normalization, recognition of Israel, the Palestinian cause, the nature and motives of Hamas, and the international actors involved, and observing the changes between the pre-and post-October 7 phases is crucial to understanding the impact that the new wave of regional violence could have on the political future of the Middle East and North Africa.

3. The gap between official narratives and actual perception of Arab public opinion

Beginning with the attacks on October 7, 2023, Israeli and Western narratives have been employed to avoid addressing the Israeli occupation. Somewhat inconsistently, such narratives have painted Palestinian actions as international jihadism or as an Iranian plot, equating Hamas with the Islamic State or reducing it to a mere Iranian proxy, justifying the ethnic cleansing of the Gaza Strip as necessary for global security. Crucial to this narrative is the Arabs' alleged aversion to the Palestinians.

According to this, the Palestinian cause is no longer important to the Arab world, whose citizens are seen increasingly inclined to accept closer diplomatic and economic relations with Israel and are more intolerant of the intransigence of the Palestinians and the political actors that represent them (Toameh, 2012; Kedar, 2020). This assumption is usually based on the Arab states' inaction regarding the brutal Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip, their refusal to accept Palestinian refugees, and, most importantly, the normalization process of the Abraham Accords. However, all this should not be confused with a shift at the level of public opinion. The history of relations between Israel and Arab regimes suggests that the projects of rapprochement and normalization between Arab regimes and Israel are promoted by both Arab and Western political elites regardless the preferences of public opinion. The authoritarian nature of the regional power structures allows them to avoid popular accountability and to repress expressions of dissent towards the executive's choices.

However, public opinion is not entirely powerless and irrelevant. The Arab Uprisings have shown that Arab citizens can constitute a direct threat to the very survival of regimes, but also to be more sensitive to public opinion on certain issues for fear of its reactions, especially in those cross-cutting issues where it is harder to practice divide and conquer, such as the Palestinian cause (Dorsey, 2020). Indeed, opposition to Israel is one of the rare instances in which secular and Islamist opposition in the region manage to converge and cooperate, as in the case of the contestation of the Israel-Jordan peace treaty in 1994 (Clark, 2006; Schwedler & Clark, 2006) and the protests against the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in Morocco in 2020 (Casani, 2020). For instance, the first wave of normalization was strongly, and previous research on the opinions of Arabs before October 7 shows an almost unanimous consensus in considering the Palestinian question an Arab question and in refusing to recognize Israel (Benstead, 2019; AlMasri, 2021), opposing normalization projects (Robbins, 2021).

Moreover, recent research suggests that, even in authoritarian settings, public opinion should not be overlooked. Even in cases where there are no mass protests underway, the fear of authoritarian regimes – aware of their crisis of internal legitimacy – of potential mobilizations capable of uniting political opposition makes them particularly sophisticated in preventing them through the manipulation of public opinion, which thus exercises at least a passive role of influence on policies. As Weeks and Crunkilton (2017) suggest, public opinion acts as a source of legitimacy for authoritarian regimes, and leaders often justify foreign policy through nationalist or ideological appeals designed to resonate with public identities helping them to claim popular support and enhancing regime survival chances. When promoting unpopular policies, authoritarian regimes actively try to shape public opinion through misinformation and censorship to mitigate dissent and overstate their popular support (Glasius, 2018; Buckley et al., 2024). As an instance about the Abraham Accords signatories, the UAE propaganda depicted Palestinian political actors as violent and undeserving of support while promoting the rapprochement with Israel as a step towards a more tolerant and culturally advanced society (El Kurd, 2024). Moreover, authoritarian regimes monitor public sentiment and adjust diplomatic stances to reduce the legitimacy backlash (Chen & Xu, 2017). It is no coincidence that the disproportionate Israeli reaction to the October 7 aggression has forced the regimes in the normalization phase to take a step back even in absence

of spontaneous mobilizations of citizens in solidarity with the Palestinian people. As anecdotal evidence, in a meeting with former US Secretary of State Blinken in January 2024, Saudi Prince Mohammed Bin Salman himself stated that he was not interested in the Palestinian cause but that he could not afford to sign a normalization agreement with Israel without a cessation of the ongoing massacre and a long-term solution for the emergence of a sovereign Palestinian state (Middle East Eye, 2024). Moreover, given today's further collapse of the US reputation in regional public opinion and the consequent increase in support for China (Robbins, 2024), some observers see the rapprochement between Beijing and conservative Arab regimes – especially Morocco and Saudi Arabia – as a means of aligning themselves with popular sentiment and counterbalancing dissent toward diplomatic relations with Israel (Rahman et al., 2024).

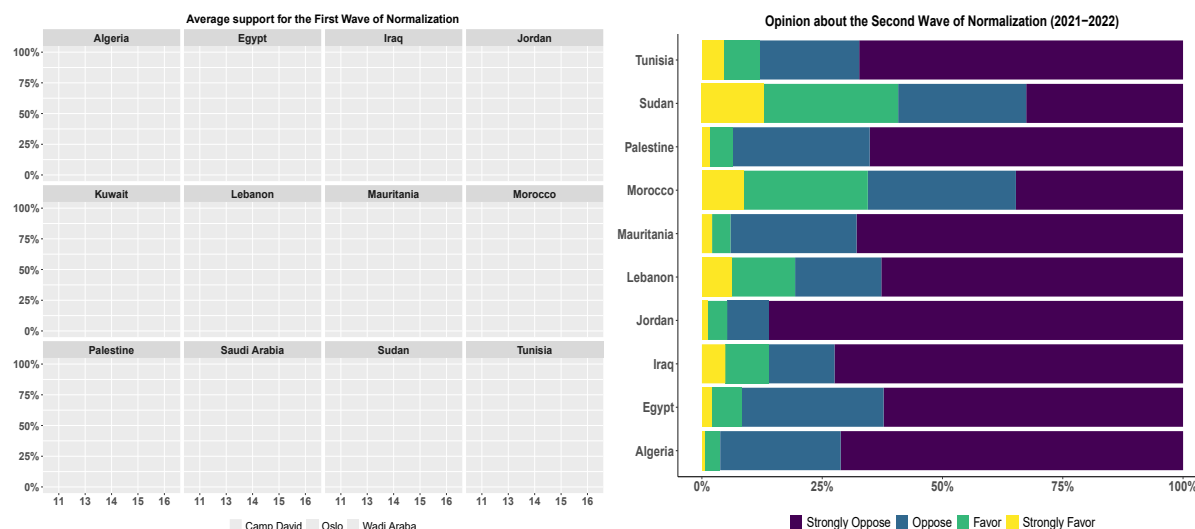
It is, therefore, appropriate to give agency to Arab citizens, recognizing their political views and the influence that these can have on foreign policy even in the absence of democratic mechanisms of representation.

Arab Public Opinion on normalization

The Arab Opinion Index is a survey dataset that collects data concerning citizens' political preferences in Arab countries, allowing for the analysis of Arab citizens' opinions on normalization, recognition of Israel, and consideration of the Palestinian cause. Since these questions were asked consistently from 2011 to 2024 – excluding the question regarding the very first peace agreements with Jordan, Egypt, and PLO, which are in their datasets from 2011 to 2016 – it is possible to observe the change in opinions over time, adopting a longitudinal approach. Finally, the regional scope of the questionnaire – administered in 12 Arab countries – allows for potential substantial differences between countries to emerge. The cases in the dataset are representative of countries that have different official postures toward Israel: Egypt, Jordan and Palestine make up the first wave normalization group; Morocco and Sudan represent the second wave (Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates are not in the dataset); Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Algeria, Iraq, Kuwait, Lebanon and Mauritania make up the rest of the sample. The case selection allows for any inconsistency between the official regime postures and public opinion to emerge, as well as any substantial differences between countries with different histories of bilateral relations with Israel.

At the regional level, an absolute majority of Arab public opinion in the period 2011-2016 (71.5%) opposed the first wave of normalization, embodied in the Oslo Accords between Israel and PLO, the Wadi Araba Treaty between Israel and Jordan, and the Israeli-Egyptian peace accords. Figure 1 shows the average support for the two waves of normalization in individual countries, offering a comparative perspective.

Figure 1. Average support for the first and the second waves of normalization per Country.



(a). Source: Arab Opinion Index (2011-2016).

(b). Source: Arab Barometer (2021-2022).

In general, the average levels of support for the individual agreements of the first wave seldom show substantial differences among them and tend to move in the same direction, suggesting that, in most cases, the Arab public tends to consider them together. Exceptions are Egypt and Kuwait, where support for the Camp David Accords is markedly more prevalent than opposition, and Sudan, where support for the accords doubled in 2014, likely influenced by the outbreak of civil war in the country and a shift in priorities. Egypt constitutes the only case in the first wave of normalization where the official position is supported by public opinion, signaling support for the Egyptian objectives of that agreement, namely, to recover full territorial sovereignty and secure its borders in the face of a much more powerful neighbor but without completely overlooking the Palestinian issue, given the anchoring of this agreement to Palestinian statehood improvement (at least nominally). This result indicates that the Arab public's ideological aversion to Israel may be counterbalanced by pragmatic considerations and real benefits such as an increase (real or perceived) in security. Thus, at least in Egypt, progress in security compensates hostility towards the neighbor. In the cases of Jordan and Palestine, the agreements signed by their elites show no different average levels of support than the others. The overwhelming majority opposes them, indicating a regime-people divide in the Jordanian case and a growing crisis of legitimacy for the PLO and the Palestinian National Authority that championed the agreement, as Martin Kear and Sbeih Sbeih also illustrate in this special issue with their respective contributions.

However, if one looks at the support toward the second wave of normalization, the results are different. The Arab Opinion Index does not collect these data, but the Arab Barometer offers a glimpse of public opinion on the issue in 2021-22, before the October 7 attacks and Israeli retaliation on Gaza. At the aggregate level, 86.5 percent of respondents oppose the Abraham Accords. Although this is a different dataset and, therefore, a less robust comparison, a 15% negative difference compared to the first wave agreements remains a significant figure that may suggest a qualitatively different assessment of the treaties. Zooming in on individual countries, support for current normalization is well below 10% for countries in the first wave of normalization, which is not surprising in the case of Jordan and Palestine, but clashes with the fact that most Egyptians support the agreements of the first wave. This could suggest that Egyptian public opinion, though pragmatically approving

the treaty's guarantee of security along their country's eastern border, keeps a hostile stance toward recognizing Israel. Moreover, the absence of ties between recognition and progress on Palestinian statehood and rapprochement on issues beyond security makes the Abraham Accords qualitatively different from previous ones, which sought at least to maintain the appearance of genuine interest by elites in the Palestinian cause and ended an era of military threats to territorial integrity. Finally, in the period 2011-2016, Egypt experienced its Arab Uprising, the fall of Mubarak's authoritarian regime, the start of a democratization process, the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and its fall at the hands of al-Sisi's military coup: in a context dominated by domestic instability, not even the Muslim Brotherhood questioned the peace treaty (Elgindy, 2012). Results from the Arab Opinion Index support this argument: while support for the Camp David Accords was consistently above 60% in the period 2011-2016, support for the recognition of Israel for the same period – and up to now – remains below 14%, with one exception in 2016 when it reached 18%.

The countries in the second wave of normalization – Morocco and Sudan – show more support (34.5% and 40.8% respectively, still not the majority), making them the only two countries where the conditions for a "warm peace" – that is, popular support for the agreements – are met or nearly met. In both cases, support is related to the level of education: those with a college degree are 28% (Morocco) and 13% (Sudan) more likely to approve of normalization with Israel, probably because they are more aware of the benefits guaranteed by the United States in exchange for signing the agreements (Robbins, 2021; Robbins, 2025). The other two cases that show slightly higher percentages of support for normalization than the average of the other countries in the region are Iraq and Lebanon, where specific ethno-religious communities have historically more positive relations with Israel than the others: in Lebanon, 38% of the Christian community supports the agreements compared to 5% for the Muslim communities; in Iraq, 29% of the Kurdish community supports normalization compared to 12% in the rest of the country (Arab Barometer, 2022; Robbins, 2021; Robbins, 2025).

Arab Public Opinion on Hamas

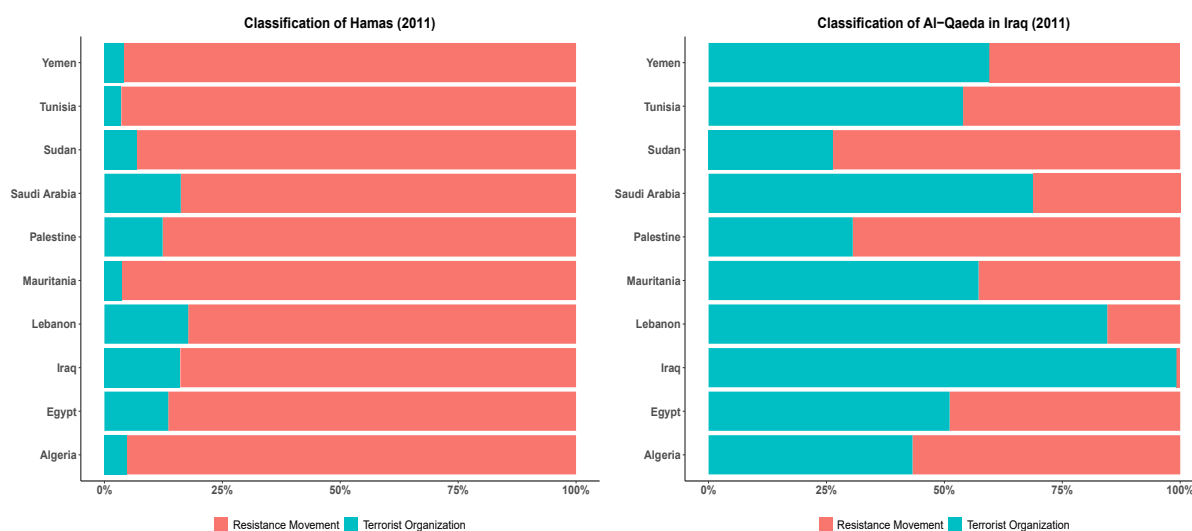
There is another narrative proposing a correspondence between the Islamic State and Hamas and describing the Palestinian Islamist movement as a global jihadist actor in conflict not only with the State of Israel but with the entire Western civilization. In 2014, Benjamin Netanyahu declared to the United Nations that the fight against Hamas was part of a conflict between the "Judeo-Christian civilization" and Islam (Slama, 2023). This narrative resurfaced after the October 7 attacks on a global level. For instance, former Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant called Hamas "Gaza-ISIS" and Netanyahu declared that Hamas is worse than ISIS (Reuters, 2023), a frame Joe Biden employed on October 18 during his visit to Tel Aviv. French President Emmanuel Macron also adopted the same perspective.

However, the overlap between the Islamic State and Hamas is inappropriate. First, while the Islamic State and al-Qaeda are unanimously considered terrorist organizations by the international community and the United Nations, the classification of Hamas is much more heterogeneous, appearing on the lists of terrorist organizations exclusively for the countries of the Western bloc – often just its military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades – marking a deep dividing line between the Western view and that of the governments of other regions, especially those of the Middle East and North Africa, which tend to consider Hamas a legitimate national liberation movement (Slama, 2023). Second, it willingly denies the profound differences between the two groups in terms of ideology, scope, and strategies, justifying the brutality of the Israeli military intervention in Gaza and the international support for it in the eyes of Arab and global public opinion instead of dealing with the political root-causes of the conflict (Clarke & Kenney, 2023).

According to data from the Arab Opinion Index, Arab public opinion rejects the overlap between Hamas and the actors of global jihadism. In the 2011 Arab Opinion Index survey, the definitions that Arab public opinion gave of Hamas and al-Qaeda in Iraq – the embryonic phase of the Islamic State – were drastically

different. On an aggregate level, 89.8% of respondents considered Hamas a resistance movement, compared to 10.2% defining it as a terrorist organization. As far as al-Qaeda in Iraq was concerned, the ratios were reversed, with 38.7% considering it a resistance movement and 61.3% defining it as a terrorist organization.

Figure 2. Perception of Hamas and Al-Qaeda in Iraq: resistance movement vs. terrorist organization

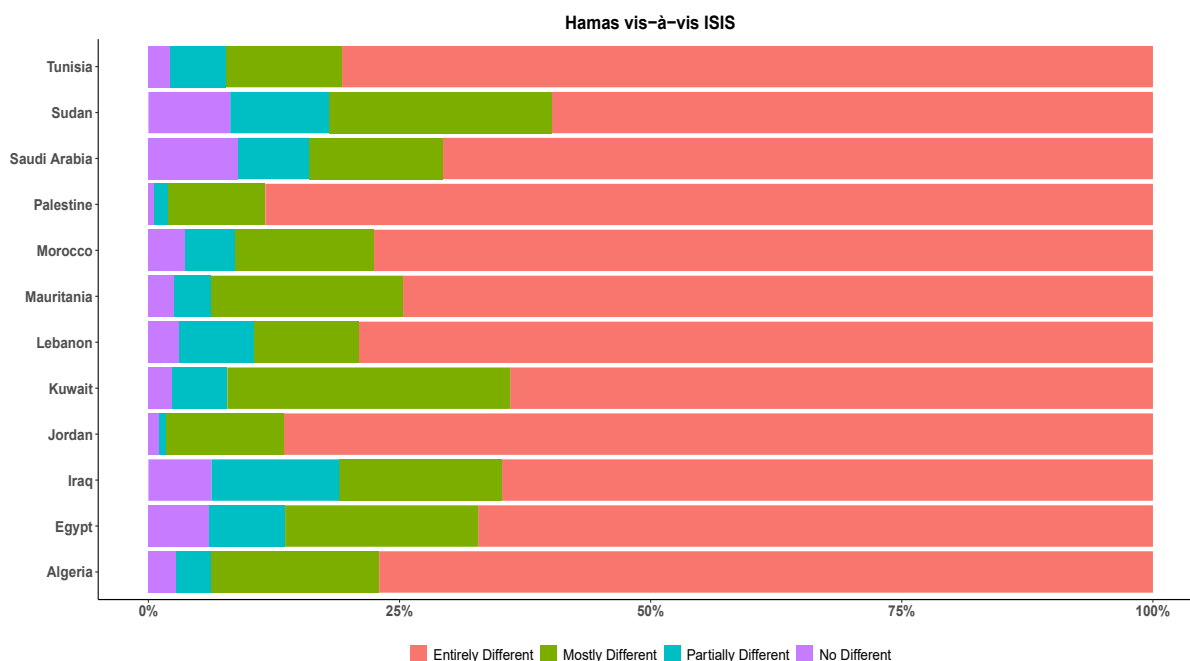


Source: *Arab Opinion Index (2011)*.

The results for each country, shown in Figure 2, do not reveal substantial differences regarding Hamas: in Lebanon, the country that emerges as the most critical of the movement – likely due to the relative weight of a part of the Christian community close to Israel and hostile towards the Palestinians and Hezbollah – Hamas is considered a terrorist group by 17.8% of respondents; in four countries (Mauritania, Tunisia, Yemen, and Algeria), the percentage does not reach 5%. As for al-Qaeda in Iraq, the results are mixed: except for Iraq and, to a lesser extent, Lebanon, public opinion tends to split, with a majority in Palestine, Algeria and Sudan considering the organization as a resistance movement. It should be emphasized, though, that these results refer to a phase in which the Islamic State was in its embryonic form and had not yet emerged as a revisionist actor of global significance under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Nevertheless, following the attacks of October 7, 2023, and in response to the Western narrative that Hamas and the Islamic State are similar, the results leave no room for ambiguity: at an aggregate level, only 4% of respondents see no differences between the two organizations, whereas 6% consider them as partially different, 16.2% mostly different, and 73.8% completely different (for results with non-respondents included, see Robbins, 2025).

From a comparative perspective, few substantial differences emerge among countries (Figure 3). In Palestine and Jordan – the country with the highest percentage of Palestinian refugees, respectively – there is a virtually unanimous distinction. The Iraqi figures are consistent with the pro-Israel stance of part of the Kurdish community, as are the Lebanese figures.

Figure 3. Opinion on the alleged similarities between Hamas and the Islamic State (2023-2024).



Source: Arab Opinion Index (2023-2024).

The slightly higher-than-average perceived overlap in Saudi Arabia partially reflects the positions of the regime, which placed Hamas - and the Muslim Brotherhood - on the list of terrorist organizations in 2015 in reaction to the threat of Arab Uprisings. However, an overwhelming majority sees no similarities between Hamas and the Islamic State. Finally, Sudan still proves to be the outlier, indicating some actual distance of Sudanese public opinion from the other countries in the sample. Regarding the view of Hamas as an Iranian proxy, less than 3 percent of respondents see the attacks of 2023 as the implementation of the Iranian agenda, recognizing the specific agency of the Palestinian Islamist group and seeing the Israeli occupation and the defense of the al-Aqsa Mosque from right-wing Israeli attacks as the main reasons for the operation.

In sum, the trends suggest that the two narratives are at odds with the perceived reality of Arab public opinion. On the one hand, although superseded by other priorities in the post-Arab Uprisings period, the Palestinian issue continues to be, in most cases, a source of animosity toward Israel. Normalization agreements are generally opposed and perceived as a policy imposed from above, increasing the regional regime-people divide. However, the Egyptian and Sudanese cases indicate that, during periods of heightened domestic instability, solidarity with the Palestinian cause and opposition to security-enhancing aspects of normalization tend to diminish, opening windows of opportunity. However, an increased propensity to accept peace treaties with Israel is not matched by an increase in support for recognition, although it is a key clause of both the first-wave treaties and the Abraham Accords. Moreover, much of the support for recognition is the result of resignation, not positive political preference (al Masri, 2021). There are exceptions though: the countries in the second wave, namely Morocco and Sudan, show higher levels of support than average, generally showing a lower level of identification with the Palestinian cause than the rest of the sample, at least in the period prior to October 7. In addition, the correlation between support and level of education suggests that awareness of the economic and geopolitical benefits granted for signing the agreements has an impact on the positive

evaluation of the regimes' foreign policy. In these two cases, by enjoying higher levels of positive support, the normalization process could foster a real stabilization of relations and the emergence of a "hot peace" in the long run, given the partial alignment between foreign policy and public sentiment. In both the Egyptian case and the Sudanese and Moroccan cases, support for normalization because of their positive impact on security vis-à-vis the resignation given by political alienation is relatively higher than in the rest of the sample. In other cases, however, normalization only highlights the regional regime-people divide, further lowering the political legitimacy of incumbents and potentially fostering domestic political instability at the expense of stabilizing regional relations, perpetuating a precarious reversible "cold peace" rather than a stable "hot peace" (Zweiri, 2021). Moreover, with the return of the salience of the Palestinian issue after October 7 and with the Arab Uprisings still fresh in the regional collective memory, the pursuit of normalization with Israel without tying it to Palestinian statehood became too risky from the perspective of the elites, who were forced to freeze the process (Daga & Simonelli, 2023). In fact, opposition to the Abraham Accords increased by about 5 percent regionally, rising from 86.48 percent in 2021-2022 to 91.25 percent from 2023-2024, with an increase higher than the regional average in countries with a previous higher level of support (in Morocco, the rate of opposition to normalization soared by 20 percentage points, rising from 65.5 percent in 2021-22 to 86.2 percent in 2023-2024) (Arab Barometer). Moreover, Tel Aviv's renewed regional aggression has lowered the chances of peace with Israel in the eyes of the public (Robbins, 2024).

The rejection of the overlap between Hamas and the Islamic State and of considering Hamas as a terrorist organization also indicate that the Palestinian issue enjoys strong legitimacy in the eyes of public opinion, which shares or at least understands Palestinian political claims, consistent with the positions expressed on normalization. Even if the stance toward Hamas and the its 2023 military operation is mostly critical in each country, support for the Palestinian people remains high regardless of the judgment on Hamas, and even the October 7 attacks are framed as a legitimate act of resistance rather than an illegitimate terrorist crime, indicating that addressing the deep roots of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a necessary condition for pursuing genuine and lasting regional normalization (Arab Opinion Index, 2024).

Under these assumptions, deepening and broadening the normalization process – the long-term goal set by the Abraham Accords – is unlikely to be pursued. Moreover, at a stage when the geopolitical focus has returned to the Palestinian territories with such impetuosity, deepening normalization relations-or maintaining those already in place – risks increasing domestic political instability, making its success even more unlikely.

4. The Gaza effect: continuity and change in foreign policy views after October 7

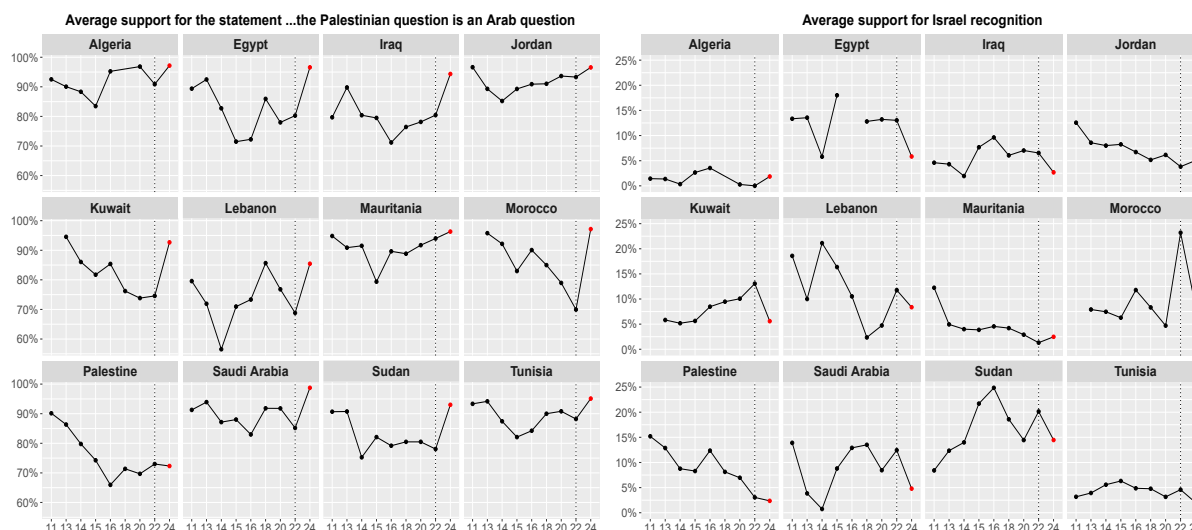
As mentioned above, since the Arab Uprisings, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seemed to have lost its centrality as a factor of regional mobilization, replaced by the Sunni-Shia divide, the proxy wars between Iran and Saudi Arabia, and the repression of the Muslim Brotherhood by conservative Arab regimes (Abdo, 2013; Darwich, 2017). At the state level, the disengagement from the Palestinian question and the prioritization of containing Iran by Sunni authoritarian regimes is evident both in their narratives and actions. Even when observing non-state Islamist actors, identity politics seemed to have prevailed over positions regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, leading to Hamas' defection from the 'Axis of Resistance' due to the repression of the Alawite Syrian regime towards predominantly Sunni demonstrators (Dalacoura, 2013).

However, the emergence of new priorities for state actors does not necessarily imply a change of opinion on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at the popular level. Although in the period between 2011 and 2020 Arab citizens were more concerned with sectarian violence, democratization, socio-economic difficulties and public corruption, solidarity with Palestine and hostility towards Israel were not questioned (Arab Barometer, 2019; Robbins, 2020), as suggested by the general aversion to normalization processes shown in the previous section,

although a general decline can be seen over time, consistent with the growing prioritization of domestic issues (Roy, 2012). Analyzing the Arab Opinion index data at an aggregate regional level, 88.9% of respondents in 2011 considered the Palestinian cause to be an Arab issue; in 2022, the percentage had dropped to 77.1%. In any case, even at the lowest point of regional identification in the Palestinian cause, more than three-quarters of the sample continued to express solidarity. As for the attitude towards the recognition of Israel, the opposition remains above 90% throughout the period 2011-2022, indicating that, although there has been a shift in priorities in the post-Arab Uprisings phase, it has not coincided with a change in public opinion, confirming that normalization with Israel constitutes a further element of the growing elite-people divide in the region.

Furthermore, the phase of sectarian violence and identity politics at the regional level now seems to be over, allowing for a reorganization of priorities based on a changed, “desectarianized” international structure (Valbjørn et al., 2024). In fact, the period immediately preceding October 7, 2023, has been the most peaceful in the region's history since the Second Gulf War, leading US National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan to declare, in September 2023 – with very poor timing – that “the Middle East region is quieter today than it has been in two decades” (Beckerman, 2023). In this context, and in the face of the most brutal military operation in the history of Israel, a renewed centrality of the Palestinian question in Arab citizens’ priorities and a hardening of opinions regarding the Arab-Israeli conflict for the Arab public opinion would not be surprising, and could have important implications not only on normalization processes – if the Arab elites decide to listen to “the Arab street” – but also on domestic political stability in the long run – if they decide to continue along the path of bilateral agreements with Israel.

Figure 4. Identification with the Palestinian cause vs. Support for Israel recognition per country.



Source: Arab Opinion Index (2011-2024).

Figure 4 shows the percentage of support for recognizing Israel and the percentage of respondents considering the Palestinian cause an Arab issue for each country from 2011 to 2024. In both graphs, the y-axis is reduced to zoom in on the area of actual change rather than showing the full scale of possible values so that relative changes over time are more visible, particularly the differences between the pre- and post-7 October 2023 phases. This choice distorts the perception of the magnitude of change in absolute terms. However, it

allows relative changes to be observed more clearly by limiting the observation to the part of the graph where the percentages move. Figure 4a, relating to the statement "the Palestinian issue is an Arab issue," focuses on the upper half of the y-axis since each country in the sample mainly supports the statement during the period 2011-2024; Figure 4b, showing support for recognition of Israel, focuses instead on the lower quarter, having never exceeded 25 percent. Graphs' rescaling already indicates an important feature: the Palestinian issue has always been and continues to be considered an Arab cause by most of the population in each country, while opposition to Israel's recognition is regularly above 75 percent. In addition, the reasons given for recognition further nuance the already modest result: 49.43% of those who do not oppose recognition in the 2011-2022 period show resignation, citing as reasons the fact that agreements are now in place (22.14%), that Israel exists in any case regardless of recognition (21%), or that the state of Israel has proven to be too strong an opponent to fight (6.29%); 18.72%, on the other hand, see recognition as a way to foster the emergence of a fully sovereign Palestinian state; while only 24.74% of supporters evaluate recognition as essentially positive and independent of progress for the Palestinian cause, seeing it as a way to improve regional stability (15.5%), pursue common interests (6.94%), or enjoy the benefits of Israeli development (2.3%). These results suggest that the current normalization processes, presented as a trigger of warm peace with Israel and its full integration into the regional consortium but without being tied to progress on the Palestinian issue, are opposed at the popular level and made possible only by the autonomous decisions of authoritarian leaders, who can pursue extremely unpopular foreign policy choices without fear of losing their position through the electoral process.

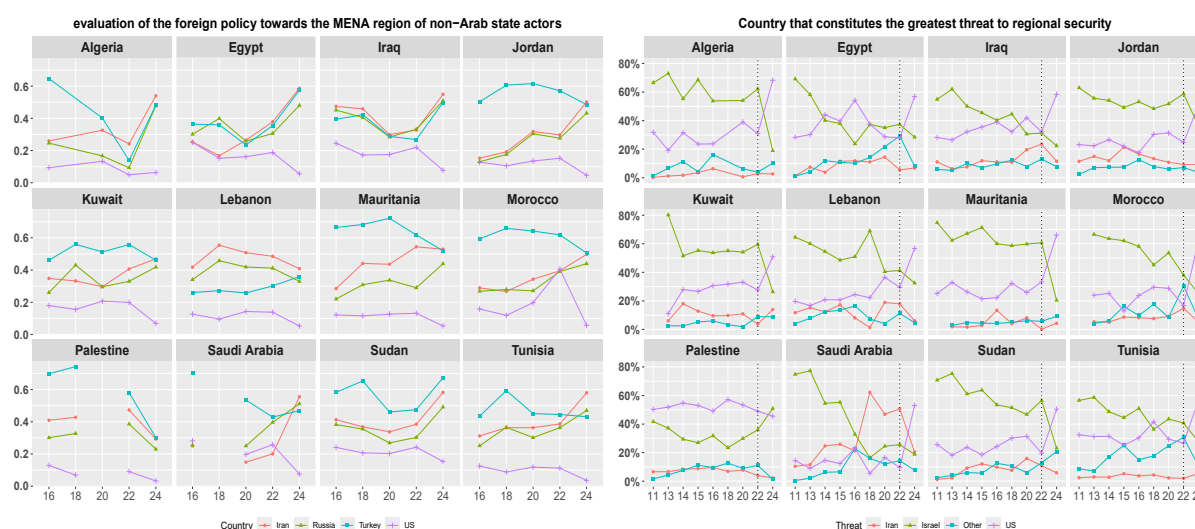
The Western liberal-democratic world's enthusiasm for normalization agreements is thus somewhat incoherent, constituting essentially a direct product of authoritarianism and a betrayal of democratic principles, promoted obsessively in recent years in the international arena in reference both to the defense of Ukraine from Vladimir Putin's authoritarian regime and to unconditional support for Israel as the "only democracy in the Middle East" (Döpfner, 2023; Mandelbaum, 2024; Molinari, 2024), ignoring - often in bad faith - the profound differences between the two conflicts. At times, an "anti-democratic" approach has been implicitly promoted by Western and Israeli commentators because of the alleged inherent anti-Semitism of the "Arab street," which should, therefore, be ignored as barbaric and retrograde (Shvili, 2023) or "re-educated" through the positive spillovers of normalization agreements with a purely top-down approach. However, looking at the data on the motivations for opposition to Israel's recognition in the pre-7 October period, political reasons far outweigh religious and identity one, indicating the real root of hostility: 71.45% of those who oppose Israel's recognition base their position on Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories, Tel Aviv's aims toward other territories in the region, and the discriminatory attitude within Israel toward Arabs; 15% condemn Israel for its destabilizing role in the region (explicitly labelled as terrorist by 8.57%); only 6.4% cite religious reasons for their opposition, indicating that the potentially anti-Semitic identity element carries residual weight compared to the glaring political reasons. Furthermore, classifying religious motives entirely as anti-Semitism might overestimate the latter: the increasingly frequent provocations of the Israeli right at the al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem - historically charged with political significance and one of the reasons for the emergence of the Second Intifada - fosters religious mobilization in defense of a symbol of Islam not necessarily driven by anti-Semitic sentiments.

Turning to the effect of the Gaza war, it is evident how Tel Aviv's disproportionate reaction has rekindled the Palestinian issue and hostility toward Israel at the regional level, underscoring how Arab public opinion is (unsurprisingly) sensitive to political events and changes its mind according to them. At the aggregate level, after October 7, Arab identification with the Palestinian cause reached an all-time high ever recorded (93%), determined moreover by the maximum year-to-year variation (+12 percent from 2022), completely reversing that general downward trend indicated above. This figure negatively correlates with support for recognition of Israel, which instead reached an all-time low after October 7 (5.56%) with, again, the most remarkable year-

to-year change ever recorded on the subject (-3.32%), suggesting that this new round of warfare represents a critical juncture. From a comparative perspective, Arab identification with the Palestinian cause has increased in every country except Palestine, where the steady downward trend points to the disillusionment and sense of abandonment Palestinian citizens feel toward MENA elites, yet another indicator of a growing regional regime-people divide and a widespread popular sense of betrayal towards the incumbents, personified by both the normalization processes with Israel and the inaction of Arab governments towards ethnic cleansing in the Gaza Strip. It is particularly telling to note, however, the differences in terms of the intensity of post-7 October change: the most significant increase in solidarity is found in the countries in which the percentages of those who considered the Palestinian cause an Arab one were lower than average, namely Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Kuwait, Sudan, and Iraq. It also reaches all-time highs in precisely those countries that have signed or are considering signing normalization agreements – Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Sudan, and Saudi Arabia – where the increase ranges between 10 percent and 20 percent. These countries are also the ones showing the largest drop of support toward recognition of Israel, indicating again how precarious the current top-down approach to normalization is by not binding Israel to deal politically (and not militarily) with the Palestinian issue, and how a genuine normalization of regional relations requires a bottom-up approach that takes into account public opinion for the possible recognition of Israel.

Finally, the brutal Israeli reaction on October 7th, the impotence of the authoritarian Arab regimes, and the unconditional support for Israel by the United States and the countries of the European Union have had a substantial impact on the public opinion's evaluation of the non-Arab state actors involved in regional politics, with potential implications for future international relations in the area. Trends over time are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Assessment of foreign policy and regional threats per country (2016-2024).



Source: Arab Opinion Index (2016-2024).

First, the evaluation of US foreign policy is consistently the lowest compared to that of its regional competitors such as Iran, Russia and Turkey. Furthermore, after the 7th of October 2023, approval of Washington's foreign policy towards the region reached an all-time low everywhere, suggesting a further erosion of

America's already weak soft power in the Arab world and an increasingly contested role of unilateral regional mediation in favor of its Chinese competitor, which has instead made progress in this direction by sponsoring the rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia (Robbins et al., 2024). The only case in which there was a clear improvement in the perception of US foreign policy and a departure from the bottom position is Morocco in 2022, indicating that the Abraham Accords – and especially the geopolitical concessions the US made in exchange for their signing – had a generally positive impact. However, the progress has been more than offset by America's unconditional support for Israel, bringing the evaluation of American foreign policy to the lowest point in recent history, in line with the rest of the sample. The Moroccan regime has readjusted accordingly its foreign policy, as demonstrated by Chinese President Xi Jinping's visit to Morocco in November 2024 – the first visit by a Chinese leader to the country in history. This represents an attempt by the Rabat regime to preserve its domestic legitimacy by promoting relations with international partners that are more appreciated by domestic public opinion, signaling at least a nominal willingness to disengage more from the American ally (Robbins, 2024). According to data from the Arab Opinion Index, US foreign policy towards the Gaza war has worsened the opinion about the United States for 76% of the regional population (Robbins, 2024).

Second, in contrast with US trends, a positive view of Iranian and Russian foreign policies have surged, suggesting a clear preference for actors hostile to Washington. The increase in Iran's popularity is particularly fraught with consequences. At an aggregate level, it has now reached its maximum level, becoming the most popular international actor in the region, with potential repercussions on the dynamics of the rivalry between Tehran and Riyadh. Furthermore, results about those regimes that have promoted anti-Iranian posturing and strengthened relations with the United States – namely Saudi Arabia and Jordan – are counterintuitive. In both cases, the animosity of the elites towards Iran is entirely at odds with the stance of public opinion, which supports the regional policy of Tehran – the only state actor that, in the post-October 7th period, has intervened militarily against Israel both directly and through cooperation with the militias of the “Axis of Resistance”. In any case, this result should be taken with caution: the popularity of Iranian policies toward Israel does not necessarily translate into an improvement in the popularity of Tehran and the network of non-state actors linked to it *per se*, but it is nonetheless a source of embarrassment and potential concern for conservative Arab regimes.

Third, in terms of regional threat, the United States pays the price for its unconditional support for Israel through the continuous supply of military aid to Tel Aviv and the diplomatic cover exercised within the United Nations Security Council, as suggested by 72% of the sample under examination (Robbins, 2024). Furthermore, there is an unprecedented transformation in the hierarchies of perceived threats between the pre- and post-October 7 phases, emphasizing how much of a critical juncture the new ongoing conflict is. If in the pre-October 7 phase, Israel was consistently considered the most dangerous country for regional stability – with the apparent temporary exception of Saudi Arabia, where Iran reached first place in 2016 – in the new post-October 7 phase it is the United States that represents the maximum perceived threat in all countries, indicating the complete failure of its role as regional mediator and the further increase in global dissatisfaction towards unilateral American imperialism and in favor of revisionist actors in the international system. Furthermore, the change in the period after October 7th suggests a harmonization of opinions regarding responsibility for the failure to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict between the Palestinian public – who have always tended to see the United States as primarily responsible – and the public in the rest of the region, increasing pressure on the elites to disengage from relations with Washington.

5. Conclusion

Since the Second World War, the Palestinian question has always played a prominent role in regional international relations. The Arab Cold War of the 1950s and 1960s and the New Arab Cold War of the first decade of the 2000s had at their geopolitical center the Palestinian question, considered a priority at the grassroots level, making it consequently crucial for achieving regional hegemony. Despite periods of international détente – represented by the two waves of normalization of relations between Arab regimes and Israel – the stagnation of attempts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to bring the problem back to global attention, with significant consequences at the regional level: both the Second Intifada of 2000 and the Hamas attacks of 2023 show that even when the issue loses its relevance for Arab regimes, it reemerges at the grassroots level in reaction to events on the ground, forcing authoritarian regimes to correct the course of their foreign policy to prevent internal dissent from becoming a threat to internal stability or a weapon that can be wielded by regional competitors.

The data on Arab public opinion is in sharp contrast with the Western narratives that revolve around the Abraham Accords and the latest escalation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Firstly, Arab citizens still consider the Palestinian cause as an Arab cause and are clearly opposed to the recognition of Israel, indicating a widespread opposition to the normalization agreements of both the first and second waves. However, there are exceptions. Some ethnic and religious minorities with historically more positive relations with Israel than the average, raise the national data of some countries, specifically the Christian community in Lebanon and the Kurdish community in Iraq. In addition, the two countries in the sample that signed the Abraham Accords, Sudan and Morocco, show average values that are clearly more favorable to normalization. However, after October 7th, support for the Accords collapsed in these two cases as well. These two outcomes suggest that the political and economic benefits associated with the Accords themselves have a positive impact on public opinion, but not enough to counter the outrage caused by the Israeli genocidal policies in the Gaza Strip.

Secondly, Hamas is considered a resistance movement and not a terrorist organization like the Islamic State, suggesting that the Palestinian cause, even when the position towards Hamas is critical, gives the organization political legitimacy.

Thirdly, the attacks of October 7th and, above all, the consequent brutal reaction of Israel have brought the Palestinian question back to the center of Arab concerns, causing a reorientation of general political positions. The impact has been particularly strong in those countries where solidarity with the Palestinian cause was lower and support for the recognition of Israel higher than the regional average, making the implementation and expansion of the Abraham Accords much harder for Arab regimes to pursue. The potential consequences of the reorientation of public opinion on the regional and international actors involved make the continuation of normalization even more complicated. On the one hand, Iran has experienced a widespread increase in popularity at the grassroots level, even in those countries whose elites consider Tehran the existential enemy – like Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, the United States – the force behind the Abraham Accords and Israel's main protector – lost their already weak soft power in the region. Furthermore, they are considered the greatest threat at present by all countries for the first time, according to the Arab Opinion Index data.

Taken together, these results lead to a rather trivial conclusion: without a permanent resolution of the Palestinian issue, attempts at a stable peace between Arab regimes and Israel – and, above all, between their societies – will be precarious, subject to revision and withdrawal, and will strengthen the soft power of actors with more combative positions, further fueling the internationalization of the conflict. In addition, as long as Palestinian grievances are ignored and denigrated, the hope of achieving a warm peace between the Arab world and Israel – the explicit objective of the Abraham Accords according to its promoters and supporters – lacks the necessary conditions. In the best-case scenario, the outcome is a cold peace likely even more precarious

than that of the first wave of normalization. In the worst-case scenario, it can lead to a reaction from below against the regime-people divide – potentially capitalizable by regional hardliners.

In essence, ignoring the position of Arab public opinion is a strategically losing choice for at least three reasons. First, the preferences of citizens partially limit the elites' room for maneuver if they feel that their rule could be threatened from below, mindful of the success of the Arab Uprisings in deposing autocrats. Secondly, in a region riddled with deep political and religious fault lines and ruthless intra-regional competition, Arab public opinion is also a 'hunting ground' for actors seeking a hegemonic role in the region, and domestic hostility translates into a weapon of delegitimization in the hands of regional competitors and an existential threat to those who defend the status quo. Third, the support of public opinion is a necessary condition for the stabilization of agreements over time: without it, normalization turns out to be a precarious and reversible "cold peace" rather than representing the permanent resolution of a very powerful source of regional conflict.

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