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Sustained Confidence in Democracy Despite War in the Middle East

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The Israel-Hamas war that broke out on October 7, 2023, marks a watershed moment in the Middle East. Prior to the war, although the region experienced persistent conflicts, they were largely isolated and not interconnected. For instance, during the Syrian civil war, while Western countries and Saudi Arabia supported the Syrian opposition, and Russia, Turkey, and Iran backed the Assad regime, the conflict was not directly connected to the Israel-Palestine conflict or significantly tied to the U.S.-Iran tensions over the nuclear issue. Similarly, the civil war in Yemen, despite being a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia, did not escalate into a full-scale interstate war between the two countries. In other words, although various conflicts in the Middle East may be linked, these conflicts have largely been contained and shown little sign of escalating into a full-scale regional war.

However, four characteristics of the Israel-Hamas war have fundamentally changed these dynamics. Firstly, Israel was the victim of Hamas's terrorist attacks, resulting in casualties among citizens from more than 40 countries worldwide. This granted Israel unequivocal legitimacy for self-defense. Secondly, after launching the attacks, Hamas adopted a strategy of prolonged guerrilla warfare, operating covertly throughout Gaza. This strategy aimed to provoke retaliatory strikes from Israel to garner international sympathy and support. Thirdly, the international community has predominantly regarded the Israel-Hamas war as an extension of the protracted Israel-Palestine conflict. This perspective posits that the assault and indiscriminate killing perpetrated by Hamas cannot be solely defined as acts of terrorism. Instead, it should be seen as a reaction to the unbearable human rights violations that Palestinians have suffered due to Israel's continuous expansion of settlements. This perspective has significantly exonerated Hamas from the moral accountability typically associated with acts of terrorism. Fourthly, as the Israel's retaliatory attacks in the Gaza Strip are causing a series of killings of innocent civilians including children, the international community has mobilized in support of human rights and humanitarian intervention, with the aim of accusing the Israeli government. United Nations has issued several statements calling for a ceasefire, while South Africa has initiated proceedings at the International Criminal Court, charging Israeli leaders with genocide. The Israel-Palestine conflict has resulted in a schism between the governments and people of the world.

The conflict between Israel and Hamas intensified rapidly following Israel's official declaration of war against Hamas. It spread from northern Gaza to the entire Strip, resulting in a significant number of Palestinian casualties and triggering a severe humanitarian crisis. Later, the conflict spilled over into southern Lebanon, where Israel and Hezbollah engaged in combat. During

this period, Israel conducted targeted assassinations of Hamas and Hezbollah leaders, including operations in Iran and Lebanon. In response, Iran and Hezbollah launched retaliatory missile strikes against Israel. Meanwhile, the Iran-backed Houthi militia in Yemen launched missile strikes against Israel, leading to further retaliatory attacks by Israel. The widening scope of these conflicts underscores the far-reaching impacts of the Israel-Hamas war. Beyond the Israel-Palestine issue, it has escalated into a regional security crisis. This has given rise to concerns about the potential for a third world war and prompted profound questions about democracy in the Middle East.

Excessive Moral Mobilization and Its Paradox

In hindsight, neither Israel nor Hamas truly cared about the human rights of Gaza residents or innocent Israeli citizens. Both parties seek to establish themselves as morally justified while portraying the other party as malevolent and blaming it for the conflict. Nonetheless, neither party's actions can be justified even by the most minimal moral standards. Hamas intentionally created the crisis, initiating terrorist attacks followed by provocative celebrations. From the outset, the Netanyahu government decided to exploit the opportunity to escalate the war, aiming to eradicate all existential threats to Israel, including Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, and the Houthis. Nonetheless, the ongoing Israel-Hamas War is distinguished by excessive moral mobilization and a conscious effort to secure moral legitimacy on the global stage.

Despite widespread global disagreements regarding the moral standing of the parties involved in the Israel-Hamas conflict, there is a general consensus that both sides have resorted to unjust means to win this argument over justice. Therefore, a salient paradox emerges; those in the Middle East understand that the ongoing conflict is not about choosing between good and evil, nor is it about who is right or wrong. Rather, it is about emotional blackmail that forces people to pick a side, despite neither option being justifiable. Given their experience of numerous conflicts and witnessing the ebb and flow of the Middle East peace process since the Oslo Accords were signed in 1993, people in the Middle East are capable of distinguishing between their aspirations for democracy and the events of the ongoing conflict. This indicates that neither Hamas nor Israel could effectively manipulate people's sympathies to dampen their longing for a more peaceful and democratic Middle East in the future.

Table 1. Democratic Support and Perceived Security Threat Before and After the Israel-Hamas War

Country	Democratic Support		Security Threat	
	Before	After	Before	After
Jordan	72%	73%	85%	84%
Lebanon	57%	48%*	72%	88%*
Mauritania	54%	57%	87%	77%*
Morocco	57%	63%*	60%	68%*
Tunisia	66%	67%	82%	88%*

Note: Mean percentages are reported for the numbers before the conflict.

Level of significance: * $p \leq 0.05$.

Source: Arab Barometer

The latest survey by Arab Barometer, the most authoritative public opinion research project in the Middle East, reveals this reality. This study examines survey waves conducted after the Arab Spring, analyzing the level of public support for democracy across five Arab countries: Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia. Table 1 presents the responses to two survey questions. The first inquiry pertains to the concept of democratic support. In this section, we report the percentage of respondents who selected the statement “Democracy is always preferable to any other kind of government” over the other less supportive statements. The second measures the perception of security threats. In this section, we report the percentage of respondents who perceive the “Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories” as a critical threat to national security interests. The findings indicate that a majority of countries, with the exceptions of Jordan and Mauritania, perceived a greater security threat after the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war. Conversely, Lebanon showed a notable decline in democratic support, with a 9 percent reduction. This suggests that despite heightened tensions due to the conflict and potential emotional sympathies with Palestinians stemming from shared ethnic ties, the moral appeals from both sides have not affected people’s pursuit of democracy. This enduring aspiration for freedom and democracy continues to drive the democratization movement in the region, a momentum that originated with the Arab Spring and undiminished by the ongoing conflict.

Polarized Effects Brought by American Influence

Although the United States does not officially support Israel’s escalation of the conflict, its unwavering and unconditional support for Israel’s actions—framed as self-defense against threats from Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran—has significantly undermined American credibility in the Middle East. The implicit endorsement of Israel’s military operations against Hamas have intensified skepticism regarding the U.S. intentions in the region. As illustrated in Table 2, regarding the question of U.S. perception, with the exception of Morocco, all other countries show a significant decrease in favorability ratings, leading to an already low positive rating plummet further to between 22% and 35%.

Table 2. U.S. Favorability Before and After the Israel-Hamas War

Country	Before	After
Jordan	43%	26%*
Lebanon	33%	28%*
Mauritania	51%	35%*
Morocco	66%	76%*
Tunisia	36%	22%*

Note: Mean percentages are reported for the numbers before the conflict.

Level of significance: * $p \leq 0.05$.

Source: Arab Barometer

What are the implications of the sharp decline in U.S. favorability following the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas War? One consequence is the exploitation of anti-American sentiment for political gain by the established order and Islamist opposition forces. For example, Lebanon presents a distinct case due to its pluralistic society, where the long-term tension between Hezbollah and the U.S. has aggravated

the polarization and political instability between the pro-U.S. and anti-U.S. factions. In Morocco, the polarization between the establishment and the Islamist opposition is centered on their attitudes toward the U.S. and the religious mobilization of the opposition. The political mobilization of the Islamist opposition continues to deepen anti-U.S. sentiment, which is likely to exploit this opportunity to challenge the current establishment in the next election.

In addition, in Mauritania, the geographical distance and the absence of a mobilized Islamist political organization result in the Israel-Hamas war not being strongly linked to anti-U.S. views. Consequently, Islamists continue to support the democratic system. In Tunisia, the close relationship between the establishment and the Islamist democratic party Ennahda has made it less probable that anti-U.S. sentiment is employed as a political instrument for the purpose of engaging in power competition. Finally, while Jordan is geographically adjacent to Israel and Palestine, its political dynamics differ significantly from Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. Jordan supports a moderate interpretation of Islam and maintains closer ties with the U.S., which serves to prevent a stark polarization of political values between anti-U.S. and pro-U.S. camps within the country.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the ongoing Israel-Hamas conflict has not diminished support for democracy in the Middle East; however, it has affected perceptions of American influence in the region and increased the likelihood that anti-American sentiment is exploited for political mobilization. The precise impact of this phenomenon varies depending on the specific domestic political dynamics. However, it is probable that individuals will reinforce their existing views on democracy, thereby increasing polarization. This may intensify the existing tensions between those who advocate for democratization and those who oppose it, potentially eroding the foundations of democratic legitimacy. For those who support U.S. involvement in the Middle East, the threat of Islamist extremism has reinforced their democratic conviction. Conversely, for those who view U.S. involvement as an embodiment of injustice, the conflict has undermined their confidence in U.S. credibility and has reduced democratic support to its lowest point.

Looking ahead, many of the region's democratic proponents—aside from leftist groups—are rooted in Islamist movements that are opposed to autocratic rulers. However, the deterioration of democratic values caused by the Israel-Hamas conflict could further shift popular support toward the Islamist narrative, which attacks the liberal democratic system represented by the U.S. This is likely to result in a scenario where pro-democracy Islamist groups could pivot toward establishing a new authoritarian regime, even if the current autocrats are overthrown. This outcome portends a worst-case scenario of the impact of the Israel-Hamas conflict on future prospects for democratization in the Middle East. It is imperative that greater attention be focused on the promotion of democratic values and institutions in the context of the political polarization associated with perceptions of American influence on the conflict.

The present conclusion is based exclusively on data from a limited number of countries. Consequently, a more comprehensive analysis is required should additional data from other countries in the region become available. However, the latest Freedom House report indicates that the United Arab Emirates and Iran have suppressed mobilization around the Palestine issue, whereas Jordan, Kuwait, and Iraq have not done so. This difference stems from the former group's reliance on

depoliticized governance strategies and their capacity to suppress dissent. In contrast, countries in the latter group, particularly Jordan and Kuwait, permit only limited mobilization on Palestine-related issues to strengthen their Islamic legitimacy without directly challenging the regime. Given its status as a weak state, Iraq is unable to regulate mobilization but employs the Palestine issue as a means of redirecting public focus and bolstering its legitimacy. As for Yemen, the conflict has further intensified tensions between the Tehran-backed Houthi group and the militant government supported by Saudi Arabia.

It can be observed that both Israel and Hamas are employing moral mobilization for their own political purposes in relation to the conflict. Furthermore, this tactic is also being utilized by ruling governments and opposition groups across the Middle East. This has the effect of reinforcing existing positions and entrenched views. Nevertheless, the deliberate and disproportionate political mobilization has not undermined the heightened democratic awareness and aspirations among Middle Eastern populations following the Arab Spring. However, in the long term, it may erode faith in democracy, particularly given the likelihood that the U.S. unconditional support for Israel will become a key pretext for future political mobilization. Ultimately, the foreign policy of the Trump administration on the Israel-Hamas war in its second term will have a significant impact on the trajectory of the conflict and the broader democratization process in the Middle East. ■

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