

COUNCIL *on* FOREIGN RELATIONS

[Don't Worry About the "Arab Street"](#)

Why international public opinion and concerns about American isolation shouldn't deter Washington from pursuing its interests.

By [Steven A. Cook](#) via [The Liberal Patriot](#)

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In early November, the media erupted with reports that American diplomats were near open revolt over the Biden administration's full embrace of Israel in its efforts to destroy Hamas. Employees availed themselves to what is known as the "[Dissent Channel](#)" to air their views on the crisis in Gaza and where they believe the administration had gone wrong. Because I spent some time several years ago reading State Department cables that were included in the WikiLeaks dump, I am certain that the contributions were eloquent statements of respectful disagreement.

Not long after these reports of dissent within the State Department surfaced, Democratic congressional staffers "anonymously signed" a petition criticizing the unqualified support members of Congress have offered Israel after the October 7 terrorist attacks. There were also reports of masked—so not to jeopardize their employment—staffers attending demonstrations demanding a ceasefire. The revolt of congressional staff was met with a fair amount of [derision and ridicule](#), especially since none of the outraged legislative aides saw fit to resign. There were also reports that personnel—including many political appointees—at the Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Agency for International Development also expressed their disagreement with the President's policy, though not with the same apparent lack of awareness that characterized the rebellion on Capitol Hill.

This dissent was fascinating for anyone interested in the changing politics of Israel in the United States, especially among the young and those who lean left. Yet far more interesting than the very fact that U.S. government employees were agitating against a policy they were charged with carrying out was the content of their critiques. Some of it reflected the heart-felt concern for Palestinians under fire, especially since official Washington has long been mostly indifferent to their suffering. They also cited the gap between the White House's support for Israeli military operations and America's ostensible support for human rights. Others were [simply inaccurate](#). The United States has never made the provision of weapons systems to Israel contingent upon progress toward peace with the Palestinians, for instance, as one now former State Department official wrote in the *Washington Post*. Indeed, the U.S.-Israel security relationship dates back to the Kennedy administration and President Kennedy's concern over nuclear proliferation, and only after the October 1973 Arab-Israeli war was it transformed into a policy that sought to prevent a regional war by ensuring the Israel Defense Forces had a "qualitative military edge" over potential adversaries.

Chief among the criticisms leveled, however, was the concern that the United States was going to [lose the "Arab street" and that Washington would find itself isolated](#) for its embrace of the Israeli government. At the heart of this mythological construct is the assumption that all Arabs living between Rabat and Riyadh think the same way and hold the same priorities. That's not true, of course, though there does seem to be a general consensus among Middle Easterners that the United States is not a constructive actor in their region. As far as America's alleged [isolation](#) goes, it is a common concern among foreign policy [analysts](#) and officials that if Washington pursues a policy in some part of the world that is unpopular, there will be significant strategic consequences for the United States.

Despite all the rending of clothes and gnashing of teeth over Biden's approach to the current war, however, it is not at all clear that such concerns are valid. After all, is it possible to lose something you never had? And from whom, exactly, is the United States isolated?

As a matter of fact, the United States has never enjoyed broad-based support among Arab publics. America's high point perhaps came after the French-British-Israel invasion of Egypt's Sinai Peninsula in October 1956, when President Dwight D. Eisenhower forced the three countries to withdraw. At least, that is what various Arab Yodas have relayed over the years. It's hard to know for sure, of course, because there was no measure of Arab public opinion at the time. If these interlocutors are correct (and they seem to be), the United States was deeply unpopular for much of the ensuing 70 years and now the problem is alleged to be worse than ever. [Polling](#) since Hamas' brutal killing spree in Israel demonstrates that less than ten percent of people in three major Middle Eastern countries—Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq—trust the United States and only seven percent believe the U.S. can have a positive effect on the war in Gaza. Those may be hard numbers to swallow, but the fact remains—taking into consideration the challenge of comparing different polls—that these results are not all that different from those of the previous two decades.

In 2003, Shibley Telhami of the University of Maryland and the Brookings Institution conducted a public opinion [poll](#) not long after the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Only 13 percent of Egyptians had a favorable opinion of the United States. It only went downhill from there. Only ten percent of Emiratis, six percent of Moroccans, six percent of Jordanians, and four percent of Saudis maintained positive views of the United States. The outlier in the region was Lebanon where 32 percent of people were predisposed toward the United States. A few years later, [Pew weighed in](#) and found that a mere one percent of Jordanians had confidence in President George W. Bush, only 12 percent

supported the “global war on terror,” and only eight percent trusted the United States to “stop genocide.” There was a contrast with the Lebanese (the only other Arab population polled) who had more favorable views of the U.S. president and America’s fight against terrorists, but still an overwhelming number of Arabs had a negative impression of Bush and his policies.

Surely there was an “Obama bounce,” right? Not at all. A 2010 [University of Maryland/Zogby International poll](#) found that 62 percent of Arabs polled had a negative view of the then-president, 63 percent were discouraged by his approach to the Middle East, and a combined 85 percent of people across the countries polled had either a somewhat unfavorable or very unfavorable view of the United States. When the Arab Center in Washington DC (an outpost of the Doha-based and Qatari-funded Arab Center) [asked people in eight Arab countries](#) how they viewed the United States after President Donald Trump’s first months in office, almost two-thirds had a negative or somewhat negative view of the United States. Only seven percent of people had a “very positive” view of the country.

It would be one thing if Arab public opinion had declined 40 or even 10 or 20 percent as a result of U.S. support for Israel in Gaza, but is there a significant difference between the 13 percent of Egyptians who had a favorable view of the United States 2003 and the nine percent who do in 2023? Does the two percent decline in U.S. favorability among Jordanians (from six to four percent) matter? It does not. The one outlier seems to be Tunisia, where the [Arab Barometer](#) research network found that support for the United States fell 30 percent as a result of President Biden’s approach to the war. That’s significant and deserves further investigation. The excellent scholars who run Arab Barometer believe Tunisia is a bellwether, but the declines in the favorability of the United States in other Arab countries were not as steep as in Tunisia—if only because they did not have very far to fall.

Would it be better if Middle Easterners held more favorable views of the United States? Absolutely. There's the risk of being so closely associated with Israel's withering military response to Hamas attack that any number of Islamist extremists will target Americans in response, but this has long been a risk to the United States for its support for Israel and other policies.

Still, the issue at hand remains whether support for the United States has cratered because of U.S. policies in the current conflict. If polling over recent decades is accurate, it has not for the very simple reason that Washington was profoundly and persistently unpopular well before the first IDF soldier crossed into Gaza. And despite Washington's deep unpopularity, it has historically achieved its strategic goals in the region—the free flow of energy resources, helping ensure Israeli security, and making sure the United States remains predominant in the region so it can achieve its other two goals.

If the United States wanted to improve its standing in the region, one of the policies it could pursue toward that end would be to change its support for Israel. That is essentially what many progressives now demand: a ceasefire with no conditions that Hamas lay down its arms or release its hostages. Of course, previous support for Israeli security has placed the United States in awkward and uncomfortable diplomatic and political positions—but it has never actually resulted in a strategic setback. The one time Arab governments used the oil weapon in 1973, the embargo only lasted a few months. But the resulting recession in the United States blew back on them as Americans blamed oil producers and embargoing Arab governments for their economic pain—not Israel.

What about America's supposed international isolation? Vetoes of several UN Security Council resolutions demanding a ceasefire and the more general way in which President Biden has aligned the United States so closely with the Israeli government has fueled fear that Washington is now isolated globally, but it remains unclear from whom America is isolated. Despite regional frustration with American policy in the Middle East, senior American officials remain absorbed in regional diplomacy aimed at ending the current conflict, bringing hostages home, and planning ways to stabilize the region after the guns fall silent.

Indeed, the kings, presidents, and crown princes of the region actually look for American leadership on this issue. Sure, Jordanian, Palestinian, and Egyptian leaders canceled a meeting with President Biden in October over false claims that the IDF bombed al Ahli hospital in Gaza. But despite this embarrassing moment Arab leaders remain immersed in American-led diplomacy to bring an end to hostilities once Hamas can no longer threaten Israel and then find a way forward to bring the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians to an end. If the United States was so isolated, it seems unlikely that Vice President Kamala Harris would have been able to meet with regional leaders in Dubai in early December.

It's true that Russian President Vladimir Putin recently visited Abu Dhabi and Riyadh to great fanfare, but this is ultimately just Moscow once again trolling Washington during a moment of crisis. That the Emiratis, Saudis, and others are willing to allow Moscow to indulge in these theatrics says little about actual power dynamics in the region. Moscow actually does not have much to offer anyone in the Middle East, and in any case Arab hedging with Russia (and China) began when American government officials, analysts, pundits, and journalists engaged in an almost decade long pattern advocating retrenchment from the Middle East.

Europeans have predictably begun to stake out somewhat different positions on the conflict in Gaza than Washington, but that does not mean that Washington is isolated. With a land war in Europe, there may be differences between Washington and European capitals over Gaza, but no European nation is distancing itself from the United States. If anything, the French, British, and Germans are hoping Congress gets it act together on Ukraine soon so they are not left to confront the Russians alone.

One could probably make the case that Washington has lost ground with the so-called Global South (an amorphous concept that, like the Arab Street, assumes things that may not be true). There's certainly anger at the United States among countries in Africa, Latin America, and Asia, but that does not seem new or much greater than usual. Russia and China have been active in these regions in ways the United States has not, contributing to gains at Washington's expense—but this has little to do with bloodshed in Gaza. Support for Israel may no doubt make it harder for the United States regain ground with these countries, but the idea of American isolation in the Global South seems to be overblown.

The *strurm und drang* about public opinion in the Arab world and the fear of an isolated America are, of course, connected. Central to these concerns is the assumption that Washington's unpopularity and subsequent isolation will somehow produce strategic failure, that the United States will not be able to get anything done in the world. U.S. foreign policy may indeed fail, but any such failure seems unlikely to be the consequence of its unpopularity and an isolation that does not actually exist.

A good deal of foreign policy making involves choosing the least-bad course of action from a range of terrible options. That's bound to make people unhappy, but that's no reason not to pursue American interests—either in the Middle East or elsewhere around the world.

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