

Arabs see Iran among top three threats to US interests: poll

Mon, 2020-10-26 23:45

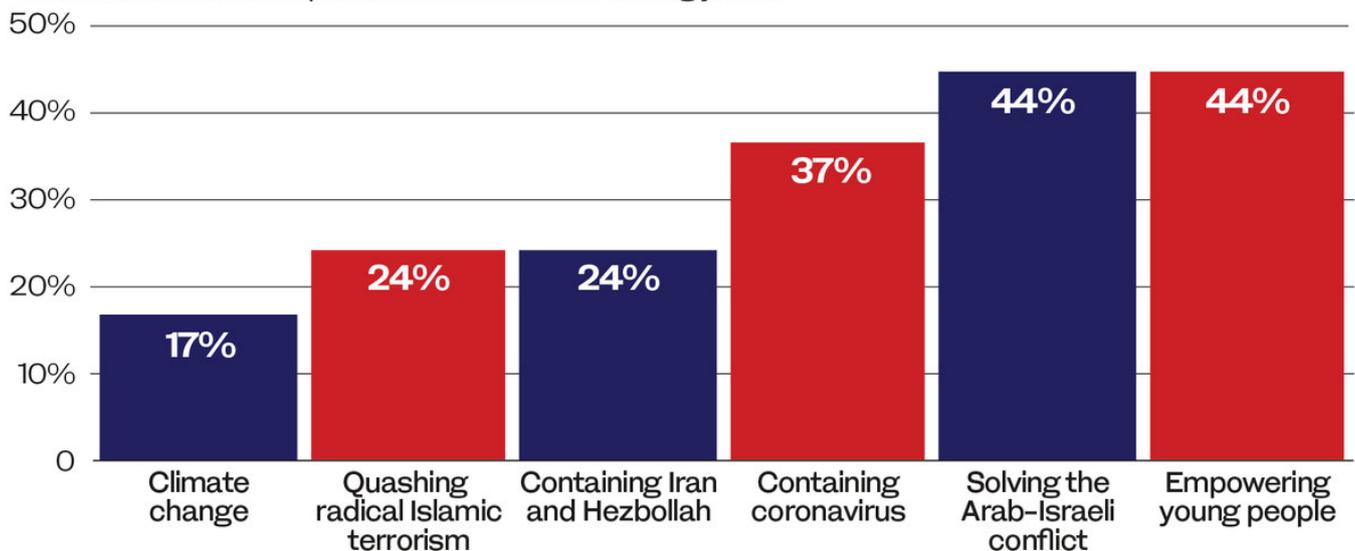
NEW YORK: In just a couple of weeks, Americans will cast their ballots against a backdrop of civil unrest, racial tensions, political polarization and an economy crumbling under the stress of the world's worst coronavirus outbreak.

In the run-up to the Nov. 3 presidential election, the Arab News/YouGov survey asked what the Arab world thinks are the greatest threats facing the US. Given the turbulence, it is difficult perhaps to settle on which of these challenges is the most pertinent.

However, for 32 percent of the respondents, white nationalism topped the list. China came in second place, with 22 percent of Arab respondents identifying the world's second biggest economy as among the biggest threats facing the US today.

Wish list of US priorities in the Arab world

What should the next US president focus on in the coming years?



Source: Arab News/YouGov Pan-Arab Survey, 2020

Iran occupied third place, with 9 percent highlighting Tehran as America's greatest threat, followed by cybercrime, radical Islamic extremism, climate change and finally intrusive federal government as America's chief woes. "The survey results reflect the way Americans themselves view these threats," said Khalil Jahshan, executive director of the Washington DC-based Arab Center, a think tank focusing on US foreign policy in the Middle East.



Extreme, right-wing groups were seen as the biggest threat to the US; respondents had great concerns about the malign influence of Iran. (AFP)

“It shows that the Arab population is better informed about different issues here in the US.”

Arab respondents do seem to have their finger on the US political pulse. Just recently, 13 members of an armed white militia were charged with plotting to kidnap Gretchen Whitmer, the Democratic governor of Michigan, and to overthrow the state government.

It also follows months of growing concern at the apparent spread of “alt-right” views, clashes between Black Lives Matter protesters and white supremacists, and Donald Trump’s failure to denounce the far-right Proud Boys during the first presidential television debate with his rival Joe Biden.

“The threat of racist, extreme, right-wing groups is the number one threat in terms of terrorism committed on American soil,” Jahshan said. “It has replaced a threat that was for a while, after 9/11, perceived as coming from radical Islamic sources.”

Although the US president has had Iran in his crosshairs, it is hardly surprising that the Arab public see China as America’s greater foe. Over the course of his presidency, Trump’s anti-Chinese rhetoric has swung from that of a mere trade war to implying Beijing deliberately unleashed the “Chinese virus” (COVID-19) to weaken the US economy.

READ: [The methodology behind the Arab News/YouGov Pan-Arab Survey](#)

“That didn’t play well in Peking (Beijing). And, of course, that relationship has fallen into disarray,” said Jahshan.

Despite their concerns about Iran’s malign influence in their own Middle East neighborhood, only 9 percent of the Arab News/YouGov pan-Arab poll respondents felt Tehran posed more of a threat to Washington than China.

“That low number reflects the gap between Arab and American public opinion (on the question of the Iranian threat). The typical Arab is not convinced that the US is on his side when it comes to Iran,” Jahshan said. “That is the general sentiment, particularly in the Gulf, a category that tends to view Iran as the principal enemy, with the US as a main ally.”

Beyond geopolitics, Arab respondents appear to have read the mood well on climate change, reflecting the view that Trump has rolled back much of the recent progress on environmental protection. “The fact that 5 percent of Arab females and 9 percent of Arab males see that issue as a vital threat to the US is correct,” Jahshan said. “I only wish the numbers were higher.”

As a longtime Middle East observer who has dealt with several Arab governments over the past four decades, Jahshan says that he is pleased to

see Arab public opinion being taken into consideration for the first time. "It is encouraging and instructive to see these surveys. I hope that will make Arab public opinion become a factor in foreign policy, be it here in the US or in the Arab countries," he said.

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[Pan-Arab poll: Biden better for region, but must shun Obama policies](#)

Mon, 2020-10-26 00:30

RIYADH: Nearly half the respondents in an Arab News/YouGov poll conducted in 18 Middle East and Africa (MENA) countries believe neither candidate in the upcoming US elections will necessarily be good for the region.

Of the rest, 40 percent said Democratic Party candidate Joe Biden would be better for the region while 12 percent said the same thing about incumbent President Donald Trump. But a key takeaway of the poll is that if Biden, who served as vice president to Barack Obama until 2017, wins the White House race, he would be well advised to shed the Obama administration baggage.

When asked about policies implemented in the Middle East under the Obama administration, the most popular response (53 percent) was that the Democratic president left the region worse off, with another 58 percent saying Biden should distance himself from Obama-era policies. The study surveyed a sample of 3,097 respondents online to find out [how people in the MENA region feel about the Nov. 3 US elections](#).

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

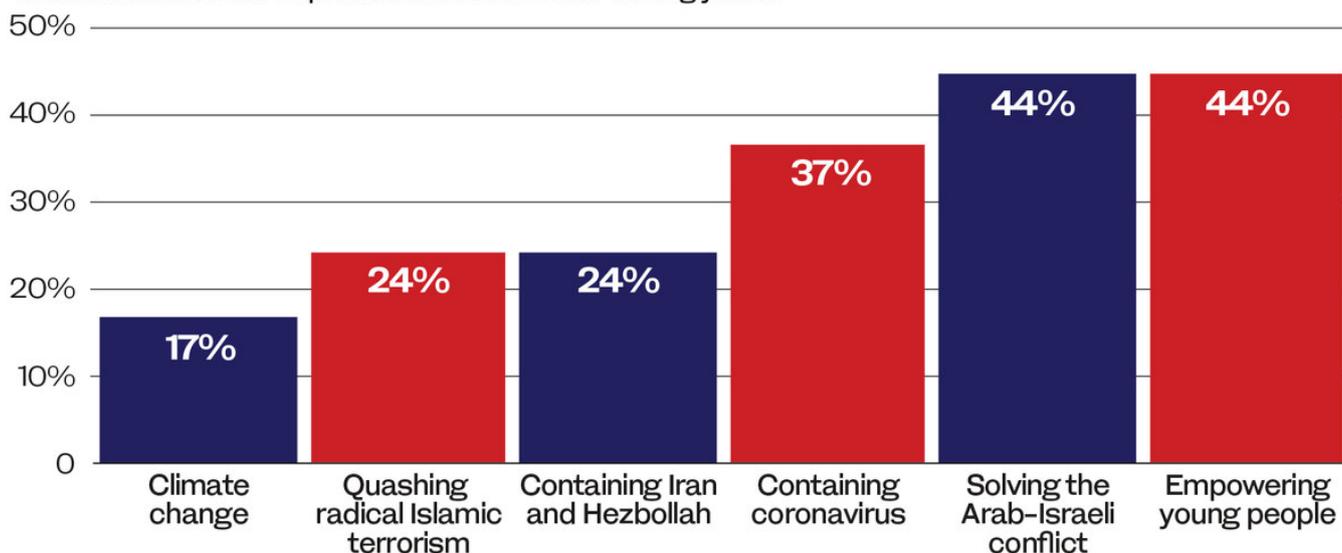
Containing Iran was found to be one of the top four issues that respondents wanted the next US president to focus on. [Strong support for Trump](#) both maintaining a war posture against Iran and imposing strict sanctions against the Tehran regime was noticed in Iraq (53 percent), Lebanon (38 percent) and Yemen (54 percent), three countries that have had intimate regional dealings with Iran.

President Trump's 2017 decision to move the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem proved overwhelmingly unpopular, with 89 percent of Arabs opposing it. Surprisingly, in contrast to most other Arabs, Palestinian respondents inside the Palestinian Territories indicated a greater desire for the US to play a [bigger role in mediation with Israel](#).

Arab opinion was largely split on the elimination this year of Iran's regional "satrap" Gen. Qassim Soleimani, with the single largest proportion of respondents from Iraq (57 percent) and Lebanon (41 percent) seeing it as a positive move, as opposed to those in Syria and Qatar, where most respondents – respectively 57 percent and 62 percent – saw it as negative for the region.

Wish list of US priorities in the Arab world

What should the next US president focus on in the coming years?



Source: Arab News/YouGov Pan-Arab Survey, 2020

Iran also figured in the list of perceived threats to US interests, although well behind white nationalism (32 percent) and China (22 percent). The other critical challenges for the US as viewed by Arabs were cybercrime, radical

Islamic terrorism and climate change.

For a country that touts itself as an ally of the US, [public attitudes in Qatar were found to be surprisingly out of sync with US objectives in the Middle East](#). The perception of radical Islamic terrorism, Iran and Islamist parties as the “three biggest threats facing the region” was much softer in Qatar compared with the region as a whole.

It came as little surprise that three quarters of respondents want the next US administration to make it easier for people from Arab countries to travel to the US. The figure for Lebanon, for instance, was even higher, 79 percent, underscoring concerns that many young Arabs are actively trying to leave the region.

Among other findings, Arabs remain overwhelmingly concerned about such challenges as failed government (66 percent) and the economic slowdown (43 percent).

Close to half of the respondents (44 percent) would like to see the next US president focus on [empowering young people in the Arab region](#) and solving the Arab-Israeli conflict (44 percent), followed by containing COVID-19 (37 percent), reining in Iran and Hezbollah (24 percent), quashing radical Islamic terrorism (24 percent) and tackling climate change (17 percent).



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Public attitudes in 'ally' Qatar at odds with US Middle East priorities: poll

Sun, 2020-10-25 23:54

DUBAI, ERBIL: For a country that advertises itself as a close ally of the US, hosting America's biggest military contingent in the Middle East at Al-Udeid air base near Doha and spending billions of dollars on US military hardware, public attitudes in Qatar are conspicuously out of sync with the thinking in Washington on Middle East issues.

That is according to the findings of the Arab News/YouGov pan-Arab survey. From the killing on Jan. 3 of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani to US President Donald Trump's role in the fight against extremism in the Middle East, respondents in Qatar belonged to that segment of Arab opinion most critical of Washington's recent actions.

The question – to what extent has Trump helped or hindered the fight against extremism – was put to 1,960 people in 18 Arab countries. Overall, 56 percent of the respondents felt he had hindered the fight. Among respondents from Qatar, this view soared to 79 percent.

Respondents in Qatar also disapproved of Trump's May 2018 withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – better known as the Iran nuclear deal – and his reimposition of economic sanctions on Tehran, with 33 percent of the people polled in the Gulf country saying the move made the Middle East less safe.

Admittedly, a similar proportion of the full complement of 2,187 people – 35 percent – who were asked the same question for the pan-Arab survey agreed with the view that the US pullout and sanctions regime had made the region less safe.

"Despite the official relationship between Qatar and the US, every single Qatari media outlet, especially Al Jazeera, is bombarding Qatari public opinion and the Arab world with anti-Trump talk," said Dr. Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, former chairman of the Arab Council for Social Sciences.

"They are the ones that shape public opinion and it seems that this is fine with the Qatari government, despite the fact that they have a vast relationship with the Trump administration. So, this shows a kind of contradiction at the official level with public opinion."

Since the Arab boycott of Qatar began on June 5, 2017, the gas-rich Gulf state has taken a number of steps to strengthen its relations with the US in order to assuage the effects of diplomatic isolation. But it has also continued its manifold engagement with a country viewed by many in the US foreign-policy establishment as a "malign actor," Iran. The two countries happen to share the world's biggest natural-gas field, South Pars.

The upshot is that public opinion in Qatar is somewhat softer on Iran than elsewhere in the Arab region, if the Arab News/YouGov survey findings are any guide. The killing of Soleimani was viewed as "negative for the region" by 52

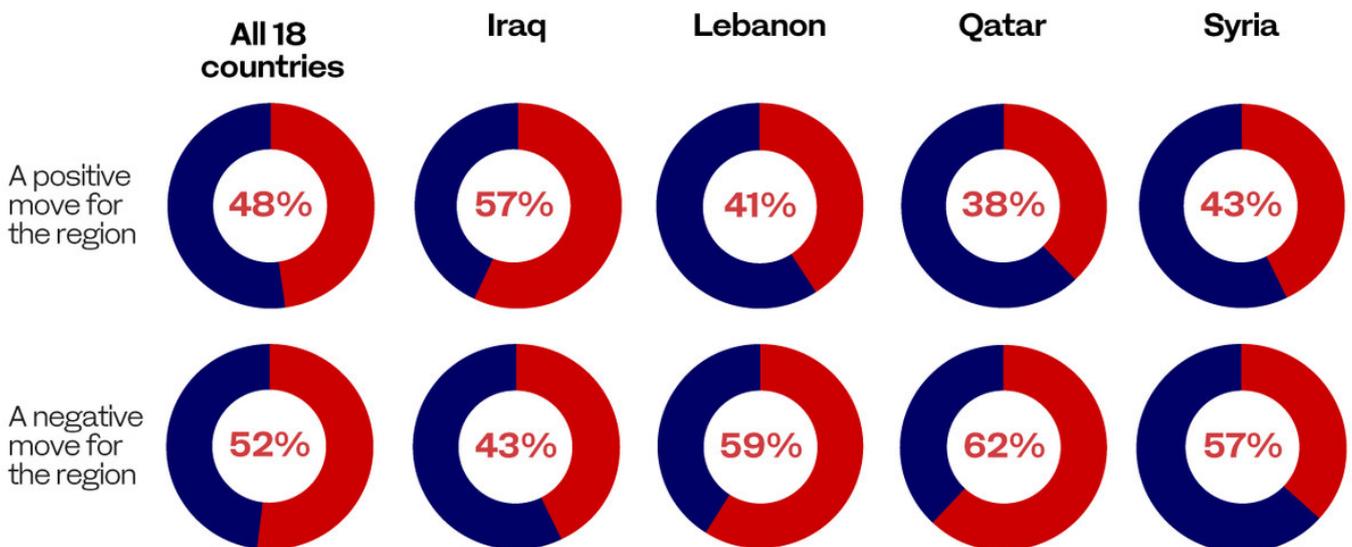
percent of respondents overall, but feelings were especially strong in Qatar, where 62 percent saw it that way.

By contrast, the strike was viewed as “positive for the region” in Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Iraq respectively by 68 percent, 71 percent and 57 percent of respondents. Soleimani, who headed the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Al-Quds Force from 1998 until his death, was killed in a US drone strike near Baghdad Airport alongside the commander of Iran’s paramilitary proxies in Iraq, Abu Mahdi Al-Muhandis.

The disparity was also apparent when people in Qatar were asked what the next US president should do about relations with Iran. A substantial (55 percent) number called for the nuclear deal to be revived, while a smaller amount (16 percent) favored the continuation of sanctions and for Washington to maintain a war posture.

Evenly split on impact of Qassem Soleimani’s killing

Trump’s call viewed with disfavor in Qatar, home to US military base, and Syria



Source: Arab News/YouGov Pan-Arab Survey, 2020

Again, by comparison, of 1,949 respondents in the wider MENA region, just 34 percent said they want to see the JCPOA revived and 33 percent said they want to see the sanctions continued and the US to maintain a war posture.

Given the apparent opposition in Qatar to the Trump agenda on Iran – and the expectation that his Democratic rival Joe Biden may revive the nuclear deal he helped draft in 2015 – it is perhaps unsurprising that just 6 percent of the respondents in Qatar said they would vote for Trump if given the opportunity, while 57 percent said they would vote for Biden.

Granted the wider region also appears to favor Biden over Trump – with 12 percent saying they would vote for the Republican incumbent and 40 percent signaling they would back the Democratic challenger – but the antipathy in Qatar seems particularly stark.

For Varsha Koduvayur, senior research analyst at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, the results of the new Arab News/YouGov survey reflect public awareness of the sharp geopolitical tensions in the region since Soleimani’s death.

“This tit for tat we saw between Washington and Tehran was certainly a factor in how respondents viewed this question,” Koduvayur told Arab News.

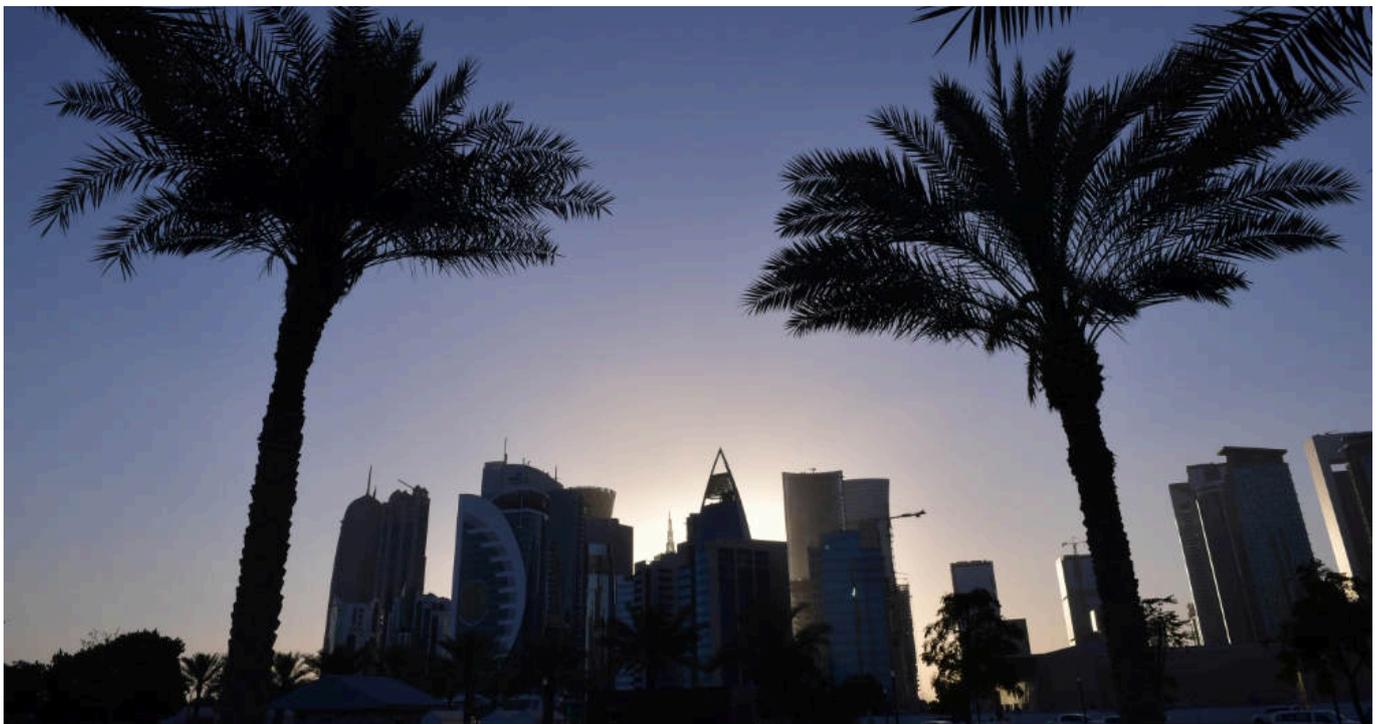
She said Doha’s relationship with Tehran was one of the “straws that broke the camel’s back” when the GCC countries chose to impose their embargo.

“Qatar has always been this outlier, not always in a positive sense, in the GCC,” she said.

The Arab News/YouGov survey results seem to confirm this difference of opinion. “This response underscores that notion to me,” Koduvayur told Arab News. “Qatar has its own independent policies at times but this doesn’t always gel well with what the rest of the GCC is thinking, nor is it always comfortable with what the US is thinking or with US interests in the region.” Finally, for a country accused by three fellow GCC members and Egypt of supporting extremism through its backing of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Qatar data offered few surprises. “Containing Iran and Hezbollah,” “Weakening Islamist parties” and “Quashing radical Islamic terrorism” received respectively 17 percent, 6 percent and 6 percent support from respondents in Qatar to the question “What would you want the next US president to focus on in the coming years?”

Presumably for the same reasons, the perception of “radical Islamic terrorism,” “Iran” and “Islamist parties” as the “three biggest threats facing the Arab world” garnered respectively 22 percent, 11 percent and 7 percent from respondents in Qatar, in contrast with the relatively higher nationwide figures – 33 percent, 20 percent and 16 percent.

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[Next US president should back Arab youth empowerment: survey](#)

Sun, 2020-10-25 23:48

DUBAI: Youth empowerment has long been viewed as a key driver of global development. The new Arab News/YouGov pan-Arab survey shows that the issue is a priority for Arabs. Close to half (44 percent) of the respondents said they would like to see the next US president focus on “empowering young people.” Baria Alamuddin, an award-winning journalist and political commentator, said a long-term challenge for modern Arab states is developing economies capable of absorbing their growing youth populations.

This is especially true, in her view, of those countries that have failed over the past decade to increase the number of “wealth-creating” jobs in the private sector.

“This challenge is as immediate as ever and is a primary motivator behind Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 and equivalent initiatives in many other Arab states,” she said.

Alamuddin believes officials in the next US administration may need convincing of the value of investing in the region’s young people.

“The challenge will be to encourage these officials to prioritize the region from a perspective of economic growth and youth empowerment, rather than just from a narrow security and terrorism approach,” she said.

That youth empowerment is so widely cited as a key Arab priority does not surprise Hussein Shobokshi, a Saudi columnist and businessman, who said it reflected the Arab world’s young demographic.

“Right now the loudest voice in the Arab world on all fronts is the youth. They are controlling the rhetoric, they are establishing the priorities on the economic front, new jobs and the direction of these new jobs, and the topics that are engaging in the media and on social media platforms,” he said.

This “rhetoric or lingua franca” is to a large extent influenced by the US through technology and entertainment, he said, but also through higher education. “We were used to the engagement of the US in the field of investment, the economy, in education,” said Shobokshi, referring to the American universities in Beirut, Cairo, Dubai and Sharjah.

However, he thought that unless the US and its Western allies engage with the Arab world’s youth in more substantial ways, the resulting vacuum could soon be filled by Russia or China – causing a potential headache for US policymakers.



The survey also found that 44 percent of Arabs would like to see the next US president play a greater role in solving the Arab-Israeli problem, while 24 percent said containing Iran and Hezbollah ought to be a priority. In this context, Alamuddin said a large proportion of the Arab public wants to see a just solution to the Palestinian issue alongside an improved relationship with Israel. "These are two sides of the same coin," she said. "We are all fed up with a frozen conflict which has gone on for 70 years too long – exacerbated by a fragmented and weak Palestinian leadership, which has long since lost the initiative." The world must act together to reach and enforce a solution which does justice to both sides, she said. "There is no solution without the US, but we are likely to see a more balanced process when Arab states, the Europeans, and even Russia and China play a role in ensuring that all sides come to the table and make the necessary concessions." As for Iran, Alamuddin believed the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" strategy has certainly reined in Iranian ambitions. "Iran has already taken huge bites out of the Arab region, with its proxies in de facto control of much of Syria, Yemen, Iraq and Lebanon," she said. Although Democratic challenger Joe Biden appears to recognize that he cannot simply return to the more concessional Obama-era strategy on Iran, it is unclear whether a Biden administration would have the political will to quash Iranian influence in these troubled Arab states. "The challenge for Gulf states will be to force the threat from Iran to the top of the international agenda," Alamuddin said. Shobokshi also acknowledged the important steps taken by the Trump administration against Iran, but said the strategy lacked the required "universality" of including the Europeans, the Russians and the Chinese. Comparing the differing approaches of the Republican and Democratic parties with regards to the Iranian regime, he said: "One looks at Iran as a serious

national threat and the other looks at it in a much tamer fashion.”

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[Palestinians in occupied territories want US to solve conflict with Israel: survey](#)

Sun, 2020-10-25 23:29

DUBAI, ERBIL: Palestinians in the occupied territories back US efforts to play a bigger role in mediation with Israel, according to the Arab News/YouGov pan-Arab survey, putting their view at odds with what a majority of Arabs across the wider region think is best for them. Of the 2,192 respondents polled across 18 Arab countries ahead of the Nov. 3

presidential election, 52 percent said they are against the US playing a bigger role in mediating between Israelis and Palestinians. Younger people across the region appear especially hostile to a bigger US peace-broker role, with 67 percent of 18-24-year-olds against. By contrast, 61 percent of people over the age of 45 support a bigger role for Washington, indicating a stark generational divide. Opinions also appear to diverge based on marital status, with 62 percent of unmarried people rejecting more US involvement, while 56 percent of people who are married with children voice their support. By contrast with the Arab region as a whole, 52 percent of Palestinians in the occupied territories support US efforts to play a bigger role in mediating between Israelis and Palestinians, with the remaining 48 percent against. "One of the reasons why you see the Palestinians looking for US involvement is because they believe the US is one of the few countries in the world that has influence over Israel and can help pressure it in the context of the peace process," Will Wechsler, director of Middle East programs at the Atlantic Council, told Arab News in response to the findings. Many observers in the Arab world appear to blame the Palestinian leadership for the lack of progress, accusing them of failing to take advantage of opportunities when presented.



"The Palestinian leadership itself is also becoming less and less positively viewed, not just by the leaders in the Arab world, but by the Palestinians themselves," Wechsler said. "If you look at recent polls in Israel, what you see is widespread disillusion with the peace process. Similarly, with the Palestinians and the rest of the Arab world, there's not a lot of hope that the process will improve anytime in the near future." In a three-part interview that he recently gave to Al Arabiya, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, the former Saudi ambassador to the US, blamed the Palestinian leadership for a catalogue of failures and wasted opportunities through the decades, especially between 1978 and 2015. One reason why wider Arab publics do not support US efforts to play a bigger role in Israeli-Palestinian mediation could well be President Donald Trump's decision in 2018 to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Some 89 percent of respondents in the survey opposed the embassy move, while

just 11 percent approved.

The decision was widely seen as a blow to the Palestinian vision of establishing their own capital in East Jerusalem. Furthermore, the Trump administration has not explicitly condemned the construction of additional units in illegal Israeli settlements in the occupied West Bank, regarded by many as counterproductive to the goal of establishing a viable, independent Palestinian state.

Despite their apparent frustration with the glacial pace of mediation, a large proportion of those surveyed still believe the next US administration should consider finding a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict a high priority.

Equal numbers of respondents (44 percent) across the region said solving the Israel-Palestinian conflict and empowering young people should be the focus of the next US president.

These feelings were especially pronounced in North Africa, where 48 percent placed the Palestinian question at the top of their wish list of priorities for the next administration.

Nadim Shehadi, an associate fellow at Chatham House, said there is a strong appetite for peace, but not without "some form of justice" for the Palestinians. "It can be achieved very easily because a two-state solution is one step away," he added.

"A state of Palestine can be achieved very easily if there's no US veto, with preparation for some minimal negotiations with Israel. The state of Palestine already exists; it was declared in 1988 and recognized by 139 countries. Kosovo was admitted into the (UN) General Assembly with a lot less."

Shehadi said the prospects for peace will depend on what is actually on offer – not on who sits in the White House or which party forms the next administration, as both the Democrats and Republicans have a "bad track record" on Palestine.

"The Trump administration achieved a huge step, but it will be wasted if it's not followed up with an initiative that gives a sense of overall solution," Shehadi added. "The key is the Arab Peace Initiative. It's within reach." The Arab Peace Initiative, drafted by Saudi Arabia in 2002, offered the establishment of diplomatic ties in exchange for Israel making a statehood deal with the Palestinians and withdrawing to the pre-1967 borders.

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