

than 300 drones and missiles. Notwithstanding the fact the damage was minimal, the attack was proof that Iran now has the capacity to inflict pain on Israel. Israel's limited response to Iran suggests that war has been averted, much to the relief of neighbouring countries. But the long-term implications are more favourable for Iran. This show of strength has likely helped its rejectionist foreign policy find receptive ears in the Muslim world and beyond.

When Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi visited Pakistan on April 23, for example, he was greeted like a celebrity. This was ironic as, earlier this year, Iran and Pakistan had engaged in tit-for-tat aerial attacks.

The two countries agreed to boost bilateral trade to \$10 billion (A\$15 billion) a year, about five times the current level. They also released a joint statement calling on the UN Security Council to take action against Israel, saying it had "illegally" targeted neighbouring countries and foreign diplomatic compounds.

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi also offered a message of support to Iran, saying:

China noted Iran's statement that its action was restrained and was an act of self-defence in response to the attack on its embassy.

What this could mean for the region

The implications of a more emboldened Iran for the region are severe. The Iranian authorities feel vindicated by the events of the last seven months. This means their anti-US and anti-Israel rhetoric will remain staunch as ever.



A welcome billboard displaying an image of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (L) and Pakistani Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif is seen along a street in Karachi, Pakistan, on April 22, 2024.
● RIZWAN TABASSUM/AFP



University students surround and welcome Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi (front-facing center) during his visit to the Government College University (GCU) in Lahore, Pakistan, on April 23, 2024.
● IRNA

Iran's drone and missile research and development program is also likely to receive a boost. And Iran's support for its network of backed groups and allies will remain firmly in place as this enables the Iranian leadership to project power beyond its borders and retain its deterrence capability.

None of this bodes well for Iran's neighbours. An ideologically energised Islamic regime in Iran would be less accommodating to regional concerns, particularly those aired by governments that have already normalised relations with Israel (such as the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain) or are believed to be heading in that direction (Saudi Arabia). Moreover, the political credibility of many Arab leaders has suffered in the eyes of their citizens due to their perceived ineffectiveness in supporting the Palestinians in Gaza.

Iran's leaders did not plan the series of events that started with the Hamas attacks on Israel on October 7. In fact, they were just as surprised by Hamas' actions as the Israeli intelligence agencies. But they are the obvious beneficiary of the turn of events.

The United States and Israel are gifting Iran and its message of defiance enormous appeal, well beyond the imagination of Iranian authorities.

The full article first appeared on *The Conversation*.

Gaza war helps Iran repair image in region



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OPINION

Israel's assault on Gaza has in some ways proven to be a boon for Iran, furthering some of its strategic objectives and boosting its reputation in the region. In November 2023, a report by the Washington Institute for Near Eastern Policy found that an average of 40% of respondents in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria said Iran's actions have had a positive impact on the war. In Egypt and Syria, such sentiments were expressed by half of the respondents.

Polling from the Arab Barometer echoes this trajectory. A December 2023 report indicated that three weeks after the October 7, 2023, Palestinian surprise attack on Israel, Iran's leader had approval ratings that matched or surpassed those of the Saudi crown prince and the Emirati president. While Tunisia is geographically far from West Asia, public opinion there is often treated as a "bellwether" by pollsters. Indeed, the Arab Barometer has noted that in previous surveys, "Tunisians have had views similar to those found in most other Arab countries."

The boost to Iran's reputation comes in the wake of increasing efforts to widen Arab-Israeli normalization. This has stoked Iranian concerns about becoming isolated and prompted a shift in Tehran's strategy. Against this backdrop, in his September 2023 address before the United Nations General Assembly, President Ebrahim Raisi laid out Iran's focus on cooperation with neighboring states while maintaining hostility towards Israel and the United States.

Retained focus on regional diplomacy

Following the Palestinian surprise attack on Israel, Iran's Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei hailed the actions of Hamas. Yet, he also made a point to strongly deny any Iranian role in the assault on Israeli border communities

near Gaza. By balancing support for the Iraqi, Lebanese, Palestinian, Syrian, and Yemeni members of the Iran-led regional alliance network known as the 'Axis of Resistance' with his denial of direct involvement in October 7, Ayatollah Khamenei signaled that Iran preferred to avoid a wider conflict. This is while both Israel and the US were warned to limit their actions to avoid expanding the Gaza war.



Saudi Arabia's Prince Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Abdulaziz (R) greets the Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, who was wearing a Palestinian keffiyeh, on his arrival in Riyadh on November 11, 2023.
● AFP

Ayatollah Khamenei's actions set the stage for Iran's broader diplomatic efforts in the region over the past six months. Indeed, the Islamic Republic has taken full advantage of the opportunity posed by the fighting in Gaza to further its diplomatic agenda. For instance, contrary to expectations in some quarters, the normalization process with Saudi Arabia has not been derailed. Instead, ties have been strengthened with the Kingdom.

Shortly after Israel's incursion into Gaza in October 2023, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud discussed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the phone. This notably marked the first time the leaders had spoken since the two countries agreed to restore ties in March 2023, ending seven years of estrangement. The convergence of Iranian and Saudi interests and cooperation on the Palestinian cause is particularly noteworthy

given that the Kingdom is a staunch US ally and has refrained from rejecting normalization with Israel.

The Iranian-Saudi rapprochement progressed further as Raisi traveled to Riyadh in early November 2023 for a special summit of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) on the Gaza war. This marked the first time in over a decade that an Iranian president visited Saudi Arabia.

Iran followed up this landmark diplomacy through a mid-February diplomatic tour of Arab countries including Lebanon, where the Iranian foreign minister once again reiterated that there is no desire for a regional war, as well as Algeria, Syria, and Qatar. In addition, Tehran has been pushing for another meeting of the OIC. All in all, the bolstering of Iran's reputation in the region — simultaneous with the hit to the image of the US — may have aided this engagement.

Dynamics during conflict

Historically, Iran has seen its popularity thrive in the Arab world during conflicts between its regional allies and Israel.

This dynamic was evident during and after the 2006 Israel-Hezbollah war. In 2008, the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies' Arab Opinion Index found that Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah was the most popular leader

in the Arab world, followed by Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad, and then-Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-13). The same poll also showed that while 11% of Arab respondents had deemed Iran as one of the two countries posing the greatest threat in 2006, this number decreased to 7% in 2008. At the same, perceptions of the US and Israel as threats increased from 72% to 88% and 85% to 95%, respectively.

As indicated by the 2019/2020 Arab Opinion Index, from 2011 to 2020, Iran came to be viewed as a rising threat in Arab countries. This was even the case in Shiite-majority Iraq, where the same poll found that 91% of Iraqis disapproved of Iranian foreign policy. It was amid this turn of Arab public opinion that relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia — which found themselves increasingly on opposing sides in conflicts in the region — were severed in 2016.

Though Iran's reputation had not fully recovered prior to the ongoing Gaza war, the Islamic Republic had made some strides toward reducing tensions with Arab states. Beyond the normalization with Saudi Arabia in March 2023, this significantly included renewed engagement with the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2021 as well as diplomatic efforts made toward restoring relations with Bahrain in June 2023.

Yet, prior to the solidification of a common enemy in Israel, there was little indication that these outreach efforts translated to a warming of public opinion toward Iran in Arab states.

Looking ahead

The longer the Gaza war continues, the more Iran can be expected to strengthen its relationships with Arab governments. If the early reports from the Arab Barometer and the Washington Institute are any indication, Tehran's response to the war — both diplomatically and with its historical support for Palestine — will continue to gain favor with the Arab publics.

On the other hand, as the US continues to support Israel — even as it attempts to restrain Tel Aviv's most militant actions — America's standing in the Arab world will likely continue to plummet. Developments such as the US vetoing of an Arab-led and Iran-backed UN Security Council resolution calling for an immediate cease-fire in Gaza only solidified this reality.

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