

The Abraham Accords between Israel and four Arab states were considered a historic breakthrough – but they are treaties between governments, not between peoples. 89 percent of the population in the Arab countries continue to reject Israel.

From Mohamed Diwan

“No peace with Israel. No recognition of Israel. No negotiations with Israel” – the “Three No’s” of the Arab League of 1967 still characterize the attitude of the vast majority of the Arab population today.

According to a survey conducted by the Arab Center Washington DC between December 12, 2023 and January 5, 2024, 89% of the population in Arab countries reject recognition of Israel. Approval of the Palestinian cause as a “pan-Arab issue” reached 92% – the highest figure since the surveys began in 2011.

The survey was conducted with 8,000 people in the 16 Arab countries of Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Yemen, Oman, Qatar, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and the West Bank. They represent 95 percent of the Arab population.

The shifts since October 7, 2023 have been particularly dramatic in Saudi Arabia, where opposition to the recognition of Israel rose from 38% (2022) to 68% (2024). Identification with the Palestinian cause as a pan-Arab issue rose in Saudi Arabia from 69% (2022) to 95% (2024).

A separate survey by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, conducted between November 14 and December 6, 2023, showed that 96 percent of Saudis want Arab countries to “immediately break off all diplomatic, political, economic and other contacts with Israel as a protest against its military action in Gaza”.

According to the same survey, Hamas’ image in Saudi Arabia improved dramatically after the massacre on 7 October 2023: 40% of respondents now had a positive image of the terrorist organization – compared to just 10% in a survey conducted in August 2023. And 91% agreed with the statement: “Despite the destruction and loss of life, this war in Gaza is a victory for the Palestinians, Arabs and Muslims.” 87% were of the opinion: “Recent events show that Israel is so weak and internally divided that it can one day be defeated.”

The rejection of Israel among broad sections of the Arab population also has a long

tradition at the political level and dates back to 1947, when the Arab League categorically rejected the UN Partition Plan (Resolution 181) – a plan that would have created a Palestinian Arab state on 43 percent of the former British Mandate territory. According to an article in the Egyptian newspaper Akhbar al-Yom on October 11, 1947, the Secretary General of the Arab League, Azzam Pasha, threatened a “war of extermination and a massive massacre that will be spoken of like the Tartar massacres”. Even President Mahmoud Abbas admitted in an interview with the Israeli television station Channel 2 in 2011: “It (this rejection, ed.) was our mistake. It was an Arab mistake altogether.”

This rejection was repeated again and again in the following decades:

- The “Three No’s” of the Arab League in Khartoum in 1967 (“No peace. No recognition. No negotiations.”).
- Just over thirty years later, the rejection of Camp David 2000 (91-92% of the West Bank offered – documented by the US chief negotiator Dennis Ross in his book “The Missing Peace”).
- And again a few years later, in 2008, the offer made by the then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert (93.7% plus land swap, Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem – confirmed by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in her memoirs).

Former US President Bill Clinton wrote in his autobiography “My Life” that Arafat’s rejection at the time was a “mistake of historic proportions”.

## **Breakthrough at political level - resistance among the population**

The signing of the 2020 Abraham Accords between Israel, the United Arab Emirates

UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan thus represented a break with the Arab consensus. Bilateral trade between the UAE and Israel exploded from around USD 200 million (2020) to USD 3.2 billion (2024), according to data from the Emirates News Agency. Defense cooperation deepened significantly – UAE forces deployed Israeli Barak air defense systems against Iranian and Houthi threats, according to Defense News reports.

But Arab opposition to Israel remains widespread, existential and categorical. Even in those states that have signed the Abraham Accords, hostility towards Israel remains widespread among the population. According to a survey conducted by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy in March 2022, 71% of the population in the UAE have a negative view of the Abraham Accords. In Bahrain, according to the same source, only 30 percent of young people support normalization, while 53 percent oppose it.

The Arab Barometer found that in none of the seven countries surveyed did support for normalization of relations with Israel exceed 13 percent. Michael Robbins, director of the Arab Barometer, summarized in his Foreign Affairs article: “After Israel launched its war in Gaza, Arab-Israeli normalization was brought to a halt... Daily protests across the region may not trigger major policy changes, but they limit what autocratic governments can do.”

## **The roots of hostility – with Saudi Arabia at the center**

The deep rejection of Israel in the Arab world is not only linked to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. According to the ADL Global 100 Index published in January 2025, which is based on a survey of 58,000 people in 103 countries, 76% of respondents in the Middle East and North Africa have deeply rooted anti-Semitic attitudes. This is by far the highest figure of all world regions. The countries with the most widespread anti-Semitism were the West Bank and Gaza (97%), Kuwait (97%) and Indonesia (96%). By comparison, the figure in Sweden is 5 percent and in Canada 8 percent.

These findings are not new. A Pew Research Center survey had already documented the dimension of anti-Semitic attitudes in the Arab world in 2010: 97 percent of respondents in Jordan expressed an unfavorable opinion of Jews at the time, as did

97 percent in the Palestinian territories and 95 percent in Egypt. In Lebanon, the figure was 98 percent – among Sunnis (98%) as well as Shiites (98%) and even Lebanese Christians (97%). These figures also show that hatred of Jews in the Arab world is cross-community and predates the modern Middle East conflict.

Saudi Arabia has been an epicenter of anti-Semitic indoctrination for decades. According to a November 2018 report by the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), Saudi textbooks referred to Jews as “apes” and Christians as “pigs”, urged students to shun Jews and not befriend them, and claimed that Jews worship the devil. One 10th grade textbook taught: “The hour will not come until the Muslims fight the Jews and the Muslims kill all the Jews.”

According to BBC Panorama, the Imam of the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Abdul Rahman Al-Sudais, described Jews as “the scum of the earth” and “descendants of apes and pigs”. In 2001-2002, Saudi state television produced the 41-part series “Rider Without a Horse”, which portrayed the anti-Semitic forgery “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” as fact. Egypt also broadcast this series during Ramadan, when the highest ratings are recorded. According to the Hudson Institute, the “Protocols” were distributed with the official support of the governments of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya and Syria.

Jordan – officially at peace with Israel since 1994 – continues to maintain anti-Semitic textbooks, according to ADL analysis (2021). A 7th grade Islamic education textbook asks students, “Among the characteristics of Jews for which they are known are: (A) breaking treaties, (B) treachery and deceit, (C) hatred of Muslims, or (D) all of the above.” According to reports in the Times of Israel, Jordan refuses entry to Jews with visible religious symbols – prayer shawls (tallit) or prayer belts (tefillin).

In Yemen, according to reports in the Times of Israel, the Houthi militias expelled almost all remaining Jews by March 2021 – with threatening messages: “We warn you to leave the area immediately... We give you ten days or you will regret it.” The Houthi flag bears the slogan “Death to Israel, curse on the Jews”.

## Three causes of Arab anti-Semitism

In its October 2024 study, the Institute for National Security Studies (INSS) in Tel Aviv identified three main sources of Jew-hatred in the Arab world: firstly, the Palestine conflict; secondly, theological tensions from the 7th and 8th centuries between Jews and Muslims; and thirdly, anti-Semitism imported from the West – in particular the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion”, which have been circulating in the region since the early 20th century.

The historian Bernard Lewis wrote back in the 1980s that the volume of anti-Semitic literature in the Arab world had reached a level that was “considerably greater than in France in the late 19th and early 20th centuries” and “can be compared with Nazi Germany”. According to Lewis, the rise of political Islam in the 1980s added an explicitly religious component to the hatred of Jews.

Arab resistance to normalization with Israel is therefore not primarily a political conflict over territory or Palestinian rights. It is an expression of a deeply rooted hatred of Jews that has been passed down through generations and is systematically reproduced by state-sponsored education systems, religious authorities and the media.

The “Three No’s” of Khartoum in 1967 were therefore not the result of failed negotiations – they were the expression of a basic attitude that regards any Jewish sovereignty on former Islamic soil as illegitimate. The position that Israel is a “catastrophe for the Arab and Islamic nation” (Hamas official Ghazi Hamad) is not a fringe opinion of terrorists – it is the mainstream of Arab public opinion.

However, the Abraham Accords show that change is possible. But as long as the majority of Arab states continue to educate their populations in hatred of Jews, as long as religious authorities demonize Jews as the “scum of the earth”, as long as the media spread the “Protocols of the Elders of Zion” – any normalization will remain a fragile elite project against the declared will of a population that rejects not Israel, but Jews as such.

Mohamed Diwan is an Arab political analyst