FP

ANALYSIS

On the Iran War, a Deep Disconnect Between Experts and Policymakers

Few Mideast scholars saw regime change or democracy as possible outcomes.

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Many Americans opposed going to war against Iran, including some Republican voters, but among academics who study the Middle East, the opposition was overwhelming. Only 5 percent of academic experts polled in the days leading up to the Feb. 28 U.S.-Israeli attacks supported launching a war and only 1 percent thought that a broad assault would produce a pro-American democratic regime in Iran. Some 94 percent of experts thought the Trump administration's approach to Iran was making such a war more likely—an overwhelming consensus. Expert knowledge is often dismissed by this administration but in retrospect it seems that academics understood better than policymakers the cohesion of Iran's regime and its ability and willingness to fight back.

We have been polling scholars of the Middle East once or twice a year since 2021, including members of the American Political Science Association, the American Historical Association, the Middle East Studies Association, and those affiliated with the Project on Middle East Political Science. We publish the results as part of our Middle East Scholar Barometer. This year, we had 641 respondents, with roughly three-quarters of them based in the United States. The survey period of Feb. 19 to March 11 spanned the launch of the war, with about one-third of the responses coming after it began, allowing an unusual opportunity to assess changes in views after the fighting got underway.

The scholars got a lot of things right that the administration and much of the media did not. They were collectively savvy enough to see that the negotiations taking place in Oman were unlikely to produce a new nuclear agreement. Only 1 percent of respondents saw such an outcome as very likely under the Trump administration, with another 21 percent considering it somewhat likely. The war did not increase their optimism about a deal. After the fighting began, the percentage that saw a deal as very unlikely went from 26 percent to 62 percent.

Instead, a solid 51 percent expected the Iranian regime to survive in something like its prewar form—an outcome that is looking increasingly likely and that the scholars anticipated far better than the pundits or the Israeli and U.S. officials briefing them. And, of course, many scholars saw that things could get worse: 18 percent expected the emergence of a new anti-American autocracy, such as an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-led military regime, and 21 percent expected state failure and civil war. Strikingly, none of those percentages changed much among those who responded before and after the war began, despite the intensity and devastation wreaked by the United States and Israel, and the killing of so many regime officials.

But that doesn't mean that academics saw a smooth path for the regime if it survived. Separately from the questions about the war, we asked whether seven Middle East countries (Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Syria, and Iraq) would face regime-threatening instability over the next five years. Few expected such instability in any of the other countries, suggesting that academics by this point do feel that the Arab uprisings and their challenge to autocratic regimes is over. But 84 percent considered such instability likely in Iran. Those who saw such instability as very likely increased from 44 percent before Feb. 28 to 58 percent after the war began.

To the extent that there is good news for the Trump administration in the results, it has to do with the nuclear file. Nearly half of the respondents (45 percent) did have some confidence that a war would at least temporarily set back the Iranian nuclear program, but only a small minority (6 percent) expected a long-term setback to emerge from war. A slightly higher but still small number (9 percent) predicted a long-term setback after observing the opening days of the war. But most remained deeply pessimistic about the war producing either a negotiated agreement or an enduring setback to the Iranian nuclear program. Three times as many (21 percent) expected the war to result in Iran accelerating its nuclear program rather than setting it back for the long term.

We also asked scholars whether Israel's military actions in the region would make Arab states more or less likely to align with the United States and Israel. Surprisingly, the percentage who said that they were more likely to do so doubled after the war began—from 15 percent to almost 30 percent. That's at odds with the widespread reporting of Gulf fury over being exposed to Iranian retaliation in a war they did not choose and were not consulted about. Perhaps the reasoning is that fear of Iranian retaliation, should the regime survive, will push them to huddle beneath the U.S. security umbrella, as they have done for so long. With reports that Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is considering having Saudi Arabia enter the war, those scholars might soon be vindicated.

Middle East academic experts are quite accustomed to being ignored by the government and facing pressure for expressing their views about some issues. Large majorities of scholars objected to the Biden administration's policies toward Gaza, for instance; last year, 46 percent of scholars described Israeli actions in Gaza as "genocide" and another 36 percent as "major war crimes akin to genocide" (this year, 54 percent said "genocide," with another 32 percent saying they were "major war crimes akin to genocide"). For years, we have been asking scholars whether they feel the need to self-censor when discussing issues related to Israel and Palestine. Before Oct. 7, 2023, we had found about two-thirds of scholars held something back when speaking about the Israeli-Palestinian issue professionally. In every poll that we have carried out since the start of the war in Gaza, more than three-quarters of U.S.-based scholars said that they self-censored. This round was no exception, with 77 percent of scholars saying they self-censored on those issues and 81 percent of them worrying most about criticizing Israel, compared to 11 percent who worry about criticizing the Palestinians and 6 percent who worry about criticizing U.S. policy.

This year, before the United States and Israel attacked Iran, we added a question about self-censorship on issues related to Iran, mostly to establish a baseline to show how exceptional the silencing of voices is on Israel-related issues. As we expected, prior to the war, only 17 percent of respondents (including 20 percent in the United States) said that they did feel the need to self-censor on Iran—a larger number than is healthy in any normally functioning academic environment but nothing close to the toxic climate surrounding discussion of Israel. After the war got underway, those numbers doubled to 33 percent overall and a remarkable 40 percent in the United States.

It is not immediately obvious why, but we can suggest a few possibilities. Since this war involves not only the United States and Iran but also Israel, it could be that many who worry about criticizing Israel on its policies toward Palestinians (the majority of scholars polled) now also have to factor in criticism of Israel over the Iran war. Concerns that identifying Israel as responsible for pushing Trump into a catastrophic war might accelerate antisemitism could be inhibiting some people. It could also be concerns about criticizing the U.S. government at wartime. And in some contexts, it could be the new laws imposed in several states that bar classroom discussion of "divisive topics."

But the most likely explanation, in our view, is the remarkable degree of vitriolic, intense attacks launched by the pro-Shah/anti-regime Iranian diaspora against anyone they deem insufficiently critical of the Islamic Republic. For years, Iranian journalists and academics have faced online abuse and professional pressure comparable to the experience of those who speak out on Israeli-Palestinian issues. Those attacks have ramped up over the last few months, with widespread instances of panels being disrupted by protesters. Numerous Iranian academics report being targeted on social media and reported to their deans and boards of trustees, often with pressure for them to be fired or removed from leadership positions. The shift toward self-censorship as the war unfolded could be an alarming canary in the coal mine for the ability of scholars to freely share their expertise on yet another critical foreign-policy issue.

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