

Description

Ordinary citizens and residents across MENA tend to have different perspectives on China's image in the region. Some are positive, while others are negative, and the general public's perception is often different than that of the elites. To attempt to capture such varying perspectives, we discuss the general public's opinion on China on a larger scale while employing the proper scientific techniques. The findings on the general public's opinion on China come from nine nationally representative public opinion surveys conducted in MENA by Arab Barometer from 2021-2022 – including nearly 23,00 interviews.

In this podcast's episode, we are joined by [Michael Robbins](#), Director and Co-Principal Investigator of [Arab Barometer](#), to discuss the region's perception of China based on the Arab Barometer's surveys, and the different perspectives of the general public versus the elite—as the latter tends to be more favorable toward Beijing. Arab Barometer is a nonpartisan research network that provides insight into the social, political, and economic attitudes and values of ordinary citizens across the Arab world. In the show, Michael also explains the Arab Barometer, its purpose, and how they conduct surveys and collect data.

Takeaways

- The Arab Barometer, its functions, research, and goals
- Perceptions of China in the MENA region according to surveys
- The view of China from the Gulf region differs from other countries in the region
- The negative view of China by the people of Israel and Palestine
- The different opinions between the general public versus the elite
- The factors that influence foreigners' perceptions of a country

Quotes

We find that China remains relatively popular. We see that at least half or roughly half say that they have a positive view of China overall. - Michael

There is a broad sense that the views of China are stronger among the elites, according to data - Michael

Probably in the next ten years, China will really come into view from the Middle East and there will probably be slightly more fixed views of China itself. - Michael

Featured in this Episode

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Transcript

Jonathan Fulton: Welcome to the China MENA Podcast. I'm your host, Jonathan Fulton, a nonresident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council and a political scientist outside University and Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Through my work, I talk with a lot of people in the Middle East about their perceptions about China, and I frequently hear an interesting range of opinions. However, it's not an especially scientific approach. I'm usually talking with academic students, officials, or journalists, and a few people at a time. To get a true sense of what folks are thinking, we want that on a much bigger scale. On this episode, we've got just the right person to talk with: Dr. Michael Roberts, who is the director and co-principal investigator of Arab Barometer, which is the largest repository of publicly available data on citizens' views in the Middle East and North Africa. Michael has been part of the project since its inception and serving as director since 2014. He has led or overseen more than 100 surveys of international contexts and is a leading expert in survey methods on ensuring data quality. His work on Arab public opinion, political Islam, and political parties has been published in many of the top journals in the field. Michael, welcome to the show.

Michael Robbins: Thanks so much. It's great to be here.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, it's great to have you. So, Michael, just to start. The Arab barometer reports on China over the past few years have been incredibly useful for me and for a whole lot of other people who are thinking about China-MENA. For those in the audience who aren't familiar. What is the Arab barometer? What countries are you looking at and how long has it been running?

Michael Robbins: The Arab barometer is a public opinion survey that conducts nationally representative public opinion surveys across countries in the Middle East and North Africa for the largest and longest and longest-standing project of its kind. We were founded in 2006 and we did surveys across seven countries in the region. Since then, we've conducted surveys in more than 17 countries in the region. We have done service in almost all the major countries throughout the core Middle East and North Africa at this point. What we really try and do is work to understand the views of citizens, to build capacity, and disseminate knowledge. So what we do is we document surveys through regular surveys about every two years to see track changes over time, for example. We then work with the partners to help increase our capacity to do this work so others who want to do survey research can help do that. And then, as we're doing here, disseminating the knowledge of what we find, trying to really bring the views of ordinary citizens to the table. Today, we've done more than 125,000 personal interviews with ordinary citizens across the region, and we've done this over seven waves. So we have fairly good data tracking the views of citizens over the last 15 years.

Jonathan Fulton: Cool. And for the purposes of your surveys and interviews on China, which countries have you been looking at?

Michael Robbins: So we've looked at a huge range. We have essentially all of North Africa in this report. So in our last wave and our seventh wave, we did 12 different countries. We did Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Sudan, the West Bank, and Gaza or Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq. Unfortunately, we also did the surveys in Egypt and Kuwait, but we were not able to actually include those types of questions based on some of the challenges we faced with getting permission from the relevant authorities to do the survey safely and securely with the citizens.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, I'm sure that's always a tough needle to thread in the region.

Michael Robbins: It is. It's something that we really work on because we do want to clear the data. We want to get the data from other countries. And certainly, there are some countries that we don't have. We don't really have as much coverage in the Gulf this wave as we would like to. We're still working to try and get free and fair access to a number of countries there to include those as well. But it is something that we have to be able to do the surveys safely. We've worked a lot. We have done some phone surveys in the past, which we have found some variation in terms of response patterns based on phone or face-to-face, which we can't explain. It seems like it's a mode difference. So we do believe that face-to-face is the most secure way that we can do it in the person's home so that it is a place where they feel safe and provide their truthful opinion. So it's something that's very important for us to do, but it does require us to

work with the authorities to make sure that we have access and that we aren't going to put either the interviewers or the people who are answering the survey at risk. So, unfortunately, we do lose some of the data, which is something that we regret. But it's the only way to really go about what we do safely and securely.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, totally. But I mean, still, you know, that the list of countries you just named off is pretty impressive. How many people do you say you spoke with in this round?

Michael Robbins: So this way we have almost 26 or we have over 26,000 interviews this wave. So in most countries, we have about 24,000 interviews. So it is a wide swath, I should say, that it covers the entire country. We go to all the regions of the country. We divide the sample so that everyone has a roughly equal probability of being included. So in this report itself, we include about 23,000 interviews with citizens. So it is a huge trove of data. And it really, I think, gives us a much more complex picture of what's happening across the region. I think there's often a focus on either the U.S. or China in certain countries, but this really does give us the whole region. And, you know, at one level, if we think about the population of all the Arab countries or those that are in the Arab League, we have about two-thirds to 70% of the population covered with these surveys themselves. So it has a very broad scope across the region.

Jonathan Fulton: Well, it's fantastic. So you issued a new report in August, right? "Public views of the U.S. trying to compete and MENA." What does it tell us about perceptions of China around the region?

Michael Robbins: What we find is that China remains relatively popular in almost all the countries of the survey and in all but one, we see that at least half or roughly half say that they have a positive view of China overall. So that is particularly true in places like Algeria, two-thirds of Morocco, 64%, and Mauritania, 63%. So you do see that China's relatively popular, at least in terms of overall favourability, but we want to disentangle that a bit more. And so we ask a number of other questions as well. And I'm trying to think about what is it that actually leads to China being popular. And so we do find it at different levels who ask about closer economic ties, which is a question we've asked for a number of ways and have some trend data on. We do see that fewer want closer economic ties with China than they say have a positive view of China overall. So in only two countries do we see a majority saying that they have a positive or they want closer economic ties with China, which are Tunisia and Libya. But overall, we see that at about half and for people in poorer countries who want closer ties with China and minority and poor countries. What that really means is the takeaway is that China tends to be the most popular global power. It's more popular overall than the US or that Russia and some of the surveys are down before and after the invasion of Ukraine. But that didn't seem to affect opinions massively overall. But China is really the most popular global power at this point, but it is one that actually trails some of the other regional powers. So a country like Turkey tends to be more popular in the majority of the countries we surveyed than China. But still, China's popularity is relatively high and seems to be holding up in the region overall.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. It is interesting. I wonder, because just anecdotally when I talk to my students or I talk to people here in the UAE, there tend to be very positive perceptions of China. But typically, if I ask more probing questions, it tends to be a little softer, you know, and I find that really in the region, one of the recurring themes in a lot of the conversations we've had on this podcast is that China is still kind of the new actor in the region and people don't really have as much information as it thought. So I always wonder about this kind of data if that if it's kind of soft or if, you know, more experience might change perceptions a bit.

Michael Robbins: I think that that's a really important point for our sense. It's actually interesting that we only started asking about China in 2018 and 19 that China had not played such a significant role in the region. Obviously, it started the Belt and Road Initiative and really started its engagement. It's increased particularly strongly in recent years and the number of deals it signed with different countries in the region is almost all or at least in some way, part of the Belt and Road Initiative now. So it certainly is a player, but it is a very new player. I mean, obviously, there's historic links with China, but in its new form, it is something that we are seeing coming through. And I think people don't actually know what to think about it. I mean, if they think about China, you know, we've tried to find different ways and I'll go into some of this as we go ahead in terms of different ways, we try to think about how people actually conceive of China. But it does seem that as a non-colonial power in the region, as one that has had a relatively successful economic transformation, there's a lot to think that China is relatively popular. It is something that people may look to in the region. But at the same time, our own sense is that people don't necessarily have strongly informed views that there is kind of this view of China, but it is something that isn't isn't a long-standing relationship. That people don't necessarily know it as well as they might with the US or with the colonial powers who are active in the region or with Turkey or some of the Gulf powers who've been long-standing powers. So I think there is kind of newness and you can almost I mean, one of the things I think about is if you look at some of the old books about the United States and how it was viewed in the region in the 1950s, it was a non-colonial power. People had a positive view and thought it might be something that could bring positive change. And obviously, over time, I think that that's gone down. Our survey shows that the United States is not overly popular in a lot of places, but it is almost a new hope in China that I think may not be fully realized, as you say. And as our report finds that some of this may be, some of the shine of China, may be fading. And it's something that I think we will likely see in the future based on what we're seeing now is that as people get to know China, they may start to have more nuanced, more kind of strongly felt opinions as opposed to just this kind of general view that China may be a better actor than some of those that they've known for a long time that hasn't necessarily the change that they want.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, I think that's fair. And I think that applies really to almost any extra-regional actor in, you know, in the Middle East that, that, you know, the less history there is, the less baggage there is, the more positive the view is going to be. And then, you know, more interaction leads to more opportunities for the relationships to go well or to, you know, go not so well. So it seems kind of a natural cycle, I guess.

Michael Robbins: Exactly. And I think that's one of the things we are seeing here, is that what we've asked about the trend about China, but economic ties of China, we saw that it was relatively popular in the last surveys we did face to face in 2018 to 19. The citizens wanted closer economic ties with China. But we've seen that decreasing now. Actually, then two cases in the case of Palestine and Jordan in 20-point declines in only three or four years in terms of the desire for closer economic ties with China. And many of the other countries around the region, we've seen that this is actually also in decline-- in Morocco, Sudan, and Libya, we've seen a ten-point drop in just three or four years. And so it does seem that people are updating this in terms of the economic engagement perhaps of China is taking place. I mean, you can think about what they may be looking to is thinking through how that type of engagement, what that looks like in their country to the extent that it has taken place. And people are saying maybe this isn't all it's cracked up to be, basically, but we are losing that. And by comparison, if we think about the United States, as you're saying, with a long-term partner that people know when we ask that same question, we haven't really seen declines. We've seen declines in two countries in terms of close economic ties around the same period. But the rest of the countries are basically stable or going up. So it does seem to be kind of a negative trend towards China that again, it's still popular, it's still holding up overall, but that the trend that we're seeing in the data for at least closer economic relations is one that's moving away from China and that perhaps China's not as shiny as it was as sudden, you know, that it is something that will likely decline as there is closer economic engagement, particularly as China is looking at this model and even as you think about what China is doing now, obviously with what's happened in Pakistan, what's happened in Sri Lanka, what's happened in a number of other countries is they're really thinking about how do they actually do this type of engagement. I think that likely they're responding in some ways to what they're seeing on the ground, which is that there isn't necessarily the warmth that there might have been initially in places like the Middle East and North Africa towards its model of engagement.

Jonathan Fulton: Sure. So I have to admit, I'm not a quant guy at all. So what I'm looking at, you know, big sets of data like this that kind of overwhelms a bit. But, you know, you say that you guys started tracking China in the region about 2018 or 2019, is it normal to see this kind of fluctuation in such a short period of time?

Michael Robbins: It's pretty atypical. I mean, we have seen this type of fluctuation in a few other countries like Yemen, for instance. And in a place like Tunisia after its relationship with Saudi Arabia, it declined fairly rapidly after things like, you know, Sochi and after a certain tension with Ben Ali being in Saudi. So we do see movements like this at times, but it is something that's pretty unusual. We do not typically see such large-scale movements across the entire region as we are seeing here in China. So it does, I think, as we would say and in the political science world, that it is an updating, that people are updating their opinion, thinking through, and really are finding that. I think we do see a shift here. And I mean, even for example, with Russia and Ukraine, we did do some surveys that were actually taking place in Russia and maybe Ukraine, and that essentially didn't move the needle. I mean, on Russia, basically, there was very little change. You do think about a 20-point change in a place like Jordan where we've seen this shift, one in five Jordanians have changed their opinion of China

negatively over the past four to five years. That is a huge, huge shift and something that I think is likely to continue going forward. And we do have some data that we looked at and I'm partly going to delve into this a bit more. We looked at this question about how is Chinese investment viewed. And so we asked for a thorough and detailed report. And it's a bit complicated, but it is asking about basically five different countries that you have. If a company for that country was coming in to do an investment project, what would your view of that be? And so we ask a number of different questions. And so what we really see with China is that Chinese companies are viewed as by far the cheapest across the entire region, that they would build the infrastructure project for the least amount of money, but they'd also build by far the lowest quality. I mean, that comes through without question. And all of the countries that we survey are essentially Chinese engagement is viewed as relatively cheap and relatively low quality compared to countries like Germany or a colonial power or the United States, which is viewed as much higher quality overall. And so China's brand name is one of essentially, you know, relatively not. This is essentially how China is engaging economically across the region it's not viewed as strictly. Well, we ask how would the Chinese company versus another company, American or German or a colonial power such as France, treat the local workforce. We also see that China is not particularly favored on this. They don't pay the best salaries. They don't treat the local workforce the best in people's minds. So China doesn't necessarily have that sort of a brand name in terms of economic engagement across the region. Instead, what we see is that you know, Germany is viewed as building high quality and, you know, America is viewed as typically treating the local workforce the best. And so there are some differences here that are important. And I think that that really feeds into the engagement that China may be viewed as somewhat popular overall, but as it engages more, it does seem that engagement is not one that's bringing China in a particularly positive light. And when we ask overall, who would you most prefer, what countries, what company from, which country would you most prefer to get the contract? China rarely comes up. Only in Iraq is it the country that is most preferred. You can think about that. They've just signed a deal at the time of the survey. Basically, they signed a deal with China to try and increase investment. There is some positive energy around that, but elsewhere it's not the most preferred. Generally, it's a German company or an American company that is the most preferred to do the work. And so as China actually comes into the region, comes to start engaging in the region and doing more of the work that it is intending to, it is likely that this isn't necessarily going to benefit China overall. And I think that that's probably where we see this desire for closer economic ties decreasing. Is that the way that Chinese companies and Chinese engagement are viewed as not particularly positive? And the survey data that we have for most of the countries.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. So there are a couple of I mean, that's really interesting. There's two things that come to mind immediately and one is that again because it is like a four-year snapshot, I wonder like smack dab in the middle of that, we've got COVID. And I wonder if that if China's response if that might have had a negative impact on how, you know, certain countries in the region saw it. And then the other thing I was wondering is if you're surveying, you know, the wealthier countries in the Gulf or Israel, if people might have a different view. Because I remember talking to a Chinese project manager who had spent some time in Dubai and some time in Tehran. And he said, you know, the Iranians were constantly, bitterly complaining about

the low-quality Chinese goods and services and infrastructure. And his response was, well, your country's economy is not very good and this is what you guys can afford. If you went to Dubai, you'd see the good stuff. And I wonder if maybe there would be some variation between, you know, levels of wealth in certain countries, if they'd have a different view on this. It will be really interesting to see if you're able to get into the Gulf later, if there would be a different view there.

Michael Robbins: I would have to speculate here a bit, but I do think you're right. I do think that certainly the engagement in the Gulf is very different and the way that China's there. But I also think that there is a bit of a difference as you're hitting a kind of power dynamic between the Gulf powers and China itself. But in a way, they come as kind of an equal footing if China, as any of these countries, is not for economic engagement, it can really be on the terms of the Gulf countries. They can set the terms and figure out what projects that make sense and work. Whereas I think in other countries, I mean, China comes in and is offering, you know, cheap development or cheap developmental aid in a way to build some type of project. I mean, certainly, it is something that I think those governments are more likely to accept and perhaps on terms that are not necessarily favorable. So not only because of the economy in a place like Tehran or others, but it is the fact that even just the promise of development or something of that nature is something that China's willing to do that perhaps other powers aren't. And so I do think that the views in the Gulf would be fairly different. I'm really, it's unfortunate we didn't have this in Kuwait this way, but I think that would be a really interesting case, given how strongly linked the two economies are in Kuwait between Kuwait and China. But we don't have that. But I do think that probably you'd have a significantly different view just because the Gulf is so, so different. And the types of engagement, the way that the government structured and even the relationship is just so different than essentially China being almost a donor country, one that's coming in or portraying itself as a donor country coming in to do these projects and I mean again, I think we've seen a fair amount of evidence that China's the rulers also benefit from this and a lot of these countries and certainly the main the Gulf. But I think there is a higher standard there. And again, it is too bad that we can't compare this in the Gulf, because I'd be likely to see somewhat of a different relationship there. Yeah. And really, I think it's harder to. So go ahead.

Jonathan Fulton: No, no, no. I'm sorry. What were you going to say in Israel?

Michael Robbins: I was just going to say, in Israel, I think it's a bit harder to say. I mean, we certainly see a very negative perception of China among the Palestinian population. We do surveys, some of which are in Israel, which is actually the lowest of any. And in some ways, I think that the Palestinian issue is viewed so strongly through the peace agreement or through the, you know, the conflict with Israel, that basically China is initially playing much of a role there. So what we do see is that Turkey comes here really strongly there, but I think that's kind of an exception. But it is harder for me to say. We, unfortunately, don't survey Israel in the survey itself, so we don't really know how Israelis would view this relationship. But again, it is slightly different for some of the same reasons as for the Gulf.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, totally. I mean, so in the Israel case, I mean, I was just doing a study looking at Israel trying to recently. And when you look at a lot of the stats around the region,

what you see is Chinese companies doing a lot of contracting but not a lot of investment. And then in Israel, you have the exact opposite dynamic. So, you know, an advanced or an advanced economy is going to come to China in a different way. And I think the point you make about that different relationship between the haves and the have is not. I mean, that's something about the Belt and Road kind of debt trap narrative. That's what bothered me as somebody who studies this is of course, when a country like Pakistan, you know, gets offered \$46 billion in use from China, there is no other player, you know, that's going to offer that. Right. So it does create a very big asymmetry there, whereas these Gulf countries, you know, they're FDI magnets, a lot of countries or companies, one of the best years. So the dynamics are pretty different depending on where you look at this, I think.

Michael Robbins: I think that's the case. And it is you know, we do have, for example, I mean, I think Algeria is an interesting case here that does have some oil, for example, and is a member of OPEC, things like that. It is something that we do see. You know, they're not very open to Chinese investment and they're not generally open to the outside world to the same extent as other countries. They are more suspicious, fair enough. They have a very positive view of China overall, but they don't have a positive view of closer economic relations with China that, you know, two-thirds say that they want you to know, they have a positive view of China itself, but they really are not engaged in China economically. And so I do think it kind of comes back to this idea of the brand and perhaps the need, you know, certainly that there is an advantage to having infrastructure that could be fairly given the economies in those countries. It is fairly cheap. I mean, there is a real advantage to that overpaying a premium for something. But then I'd be it's I think it is a fair point that there is a difference there. But certainly, the governments are trying to make some improvements is trying to build the infrastructure and get this done, China is the obvious partner in many ways, given the way it's doing it, but as you're saying, there are real costs that come with that. I wouldn't be surprised if it is something we don't really have a way to grasp entirely, but certainly, the experiences of the debt trap of, say, Pakistan or Sri Lanka or even Malaysia or something like that is starting to build into some of the narratives as people are more suspicious about a potential investment. I think that is the gap we see between economic ties and the perception overall. Is this kind of a key distinction there that as people start to associate China more perhaps with the economic piece, that likely that other pieces of views about China overall will likely come down.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. You know, you mentioned Algeria. And to me, that's an interesting case because what you see between China and Algeria is a lot more political cooperation. You know, like there's this old, you know, like the revolutionary connection between the two. And you see the Communist Party engaging a lot more than, say, SOEs do, where that doesn't really take place in a lot of the Middle East. And I talked to older Algerians, and they have these memories of China, you know, sending food, sending milk, sending, you know, aid, you know, back in the day when they needed it. So they tend to have fonder impressions for more ideological reasons, I guess.

Jonathan Fulton: I just got to you and made a really interesting point about a couple of months ago we were talking about, you know, how Gulf leaders might see it differently. And that's

something I want to explore a little bit because I wonder, is there a gap between elite perceptions and public perceptions of China in the region? Is this something that shows up in your data?

Michael Robbins: It is something we see. So, I mean, I think we're supposed to look at this. One of the ways we can look at elites more broadly than just the political or the regime itself is to think about those who have a higher socioeconomic status for those who are educated, who have a college degree or above, and those who don't. We generally see that China is viewed as more popular among those who are elite. I mean, for example, in Iraq, a college degree is 16 points more likely than those who do not actually have a positive view of China. We see something similar in Lebanon, 11 points, and a similar gap in Morocco of nine points. So in a broad sense, we do see this in most of the countries, in all but two countries, really, we do see this kind of gap where there is a more positive view of those who have a higher level of education in the survey. So there is a broad sense that the views of China are stronger among the elites and in some ways that may again a familiarity than that of some of the people who have a lower level degree, they don't have a strong opinion about public affairs. They may not necessarily or sorry, about international affairs, they may not necessarily have such a strong piece. But it does seem that the elites are leading in a way, on China, saying that this might be an attractive partner or something beneficial. And certainly, I do think we see the regimes, given the fact they have some disagreements. The political elites are certainly very engaged with China, but that is backed up with, again, that class of people who it's a somewhat crude measure, but at least somewhat being the educational elites. In most of the countries that we surveyed, I'm not quite all, but the vast majority saying that, yes, I mean, China is a country that they favor more highly and one that, you know, again, they would want they have a better view of. But again, it is kind of interesting to that same point that when we ask about the economic relations of China, we don't see the same differences. And by education that basically, those who are more or less educated with at least a college degree, don't have differing views. So it does seem that perhaps, as you're saying, that some of the views of China itself, thinking about what China represents, are as an as a power, as a new power, one that has certainly developed a model that has helped a lot of people come out of poverty and China itself, that elites who may know about that or have a more positive role, but it doesn't really seem to affect the desire for the closest relations. And there isn't a link between education and that through what we found on the surveys this way.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. That's interesting. Looking at the results from the report. I mean, did you see any kind of so obviously some you mentioned a few countries that had the highest or the lowest opinions of China. Was there any kind of logic to this you saw was based on region or economics or exposure? So I guess what were the countries that had the highest, the lowest, and maybe if there was anything behind it that you think explains that?

Michael Robbins: Sure. So the countries that we have that have the highest support for China overall in terms of just overall views are Algeria and Morocco. And I think what you see just with Algeria may explain some of the historic links there. We're a bit surprised with Morocco. Honestly, Morocco is always in a place the viewed the US pretty favorably as well. But it is one

that has had strong views towards China and maybe again, as you just with COVID, a lot of the vaccines for COVID from Morocco came from China. That was a key source of vaccines and that may have actually led to some positive views. And in Morocco as well. And we see it as well as Mauritania, which honestly, I'm not sure about in terms of why that would be the case. Again, it's a poor country. It's one that I think, you know, may have a need for more investment and seeing, you know, some of the investment as attractively as a place and also in Sudan, a place that has historically been somewhat cut off from the US because of the being a state sponsor of terrorism or on the U.S. state sponsor of terror list. They had to look for other sources. And so it may be that, you know, because of that, China is something that is viewed more favorably as an alternative to the US historically. But we are the place that we are again in almost all the countries we see at least half. So again, this is the higher end of the range, those who are more than six and ten. I mean, again, the place that really does stand out is the Palestinians, that they really have a negative view. And again, I think that is a very issue specific that China hasn't really done much to try and, you know, necessarily address the issues of the tensions with Israel, with the conflict with Israel. So certainly as we look at them, they're actually quite negative towards every group except the Turks that Turkey, which has actually done a lot more on that dimension. But certainly, we don't actually see as much variation. I mean, it really does seem with China across the region, most of the countries we surveyed, it's between half and two-thirds say we have a positive view. So again, it isn't something with a lot of variation, which I think is a bit surprising given that you would think that given the different history of the different pieces that there are. But again, I think what we were talking about before is this kind of the newness of China, and is it necessarily a well-thought-out view? You know, one of the things that we've tried to look at this way, this thinking about what are the issues that really define China. And so we talk about some of the economic ones, but also one of the political ones that I think has been coming up is the Uyghur issue that the wider Muslim community has been one that is basically important, open-air prisons essentially, and those in China and places. And so as you look at that, does this actually have any effect? I mean, this is a co most of the region is Muslim. This is happening, in fact. And we find that there's actually very little knowledge of this issue people don't seem to know that this is happening or existing. And so it is something that, as we think about, does this inform opinions that really I don't think it's having much more sway. I think the economic dimension is much more important. And we asked, do you follow this issue at all? The news is in a very small minority and most countries said that they're following the Uyghur issue at all. And so there has apparently been, from what I've heard, greater attention to this in some of the media. You know, Al Jazeera and others are covering this to a greater extent than before, but it hasn't really entered the public consciousness to a meaningful sense to help define China. So I think that you know, really we're still in a period where China is viewed positively overall, but it hasn't really necessarily been defined in people's minds as clearly yet. So I think that partly explains why we don't see a huge amount of variation except in the case of the Palestinian territories, where we do see that variation because of the very specific issue that China isn't really you know or not or have some stances on it aren't really necessarily leading in a way that would help the Palestinian cause in a meaningful sense, kind of like Erdogan has done in Turkey.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. So the Uyghur situation is interesting because, you know, a lot of the media in the region is state-run, right? You don't see a lot of, you know, free media and there's not a lot of reporting on it. And I think there is a logic there that a lot of countries A), see China as an important economic actor and B), appreciate the non-intervention domestic politics to whatever extent that exists in the region. China successfully framed this as their domestic problem and Tibet and Hong Kong. So we're not going to talk to you about what you do to Kurdish people or, you know, minorities in your state, if you pay us the same courtesy. Yeah. For whatever reason, it just hasn't really gained much traction. Palestine is interesting because China has always seen itself or portrayed itself as the champion of the developing world. And that's something still that's very important in a lot of its outreach to the Global South. And you can even see when the last big flare-up in Gaza was on May 21, I think. I think at that point, China held the, you know, the CW in Aceh, and they were quite vocal and just, you know, condemning Israel forward and saying they'll support the Palestinians. But that doesn't seem to translate into a lot of, you know like you're saying it doesn't really seem to move the needle among Palestinian publics. And I wonder, I mean, on the one hand, there's this rhetorical support, but on the other, you know, Chinese export or yeah, Chinese exports into Palestine probably are, you know, stifling for a lot of local economic actors and then, you know, much greater trade on valuable stuff like tech with Israel. So I imagine Palestinians kind of see it as they're, you know, talking to both sides of the face on this issue.

Michael Robbins: I think that's a huge part of it. I also think that you know, as a global power, China can say things at the UN, but also it seemed like it could take some initiative to try and, you know, lead something. I think it is in a different position in terms of power. And so words are great, but I think that actions on the ground are trying to actually, you know, get some type of fair settlement beyond just condemning at the U.N. or things like that. It's not going to be meaningful. And I think we have seen that even, you know, at least my sense is that still the US is seen as obviously the broker on this if there were to be one, not China, that China hasn't really stepped up in that sense. And I think that would be a little more meaningful. But also, as you say, I mean, clearly, it is a place that is, I think the fact that Jordan, Palestine kind of go together on this with their shift against the views of China and economic ties that they necessarily want closer economic ties. It is also a fear of the import. These are both countries that have, you know, kind of to the fact that the Chinese imports can come in at such a cheap level may also be a threat to some of the domestic interests and things like that. So again, I think it's a complicated story. I mean, what we did really see and I think this is something that historically we've seen higher levels of more countries ranking in Palestine that generally the numbers have not been as low as they have this time. But it's been kind of a decrease for almost all the countries except Turkey. And I think that is notable just in the way that they've tried to, you know, in theory, break the blockade of Gaza, do these other very symbolic things that are really showing kind of attempt to stand up or as I think China now words are good but it's not as much as what others are doing and I think that China if it is going to assume its global leadership position with the power that it has, would be to actually try and force Israel into some type of concession to the Palestinians to really win hearts and minds there to the same extent at this point. Again, it is kind of an odd issue, you know, just an exceptional issue for the Middle East at this point. I think, particularly since the survey was coming at a time when there were

peace agreements between the Gulf states, Sudan, Morocco, and others. And so I think the Palestinians are perhaps keenly aware of, you know, who are standing up for their own, what they perceive as their own self-interest. And China was not necessarily, you know, helping to either try and stop that or to say anything to stand up. And so it probably relates to some of those factors.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah, I think you're right. I think China I mean, obviously I'm not speaking for China, but if I were, you know, in the standing committee of the CCP, I think this is really not. You know, they've created a special envoy for the Israel-Palestine question. They've tried to do you know, they've talked about different initiatives. But, you know, fundamentally, the answer to these problems doesn't lie in Beijing. And I think everybody realizes that you know, they don't really have the history there. They don't have the expertise, they don't have the personnel. And it just seems you know, it seems like everybody has to have a position, you know, on this issue if they want to be seen as a global power or, you know, relevant. But I really don't think China sees this as any place where it has much leverage or influence.

Michael Robbins: I think that's exactly right.

Jonathan Fulton: Yeah. Just looking at all of this, you know, data that you're collecting, I mean, what factors do you think feature in a country's or a society's positive or negative view? Is it primarily economic because it's not such an important actor in the region yet?

Michael Robbins: I think that it's actually one of the hardest things we have to define. I mean, we have to try to figure out how is a country is actually part of our mind. And as a result, we have typically not historically asked this question, you know, do you have a positive or negative view of a country? Because when we did ask this before, we'd get well, do you mean in the case of the United States. Do you mean American movies? Do you mean like culture? Do you mean politics and economics? It is just this kind of thing. And so, I mean, we want to just take this overall view, but then tease it out. So we have asked a number of questions in the past about specific different issues. And I think one of the things that we've always found interesting is, you know, we ask a question that doesn't appear on their part, but it's kind of interesting. You know, despite the foreign policy of the countries, do you think that the people of a country are good people? And we generally find that in the United States, there's a huge gap between ratings, the United States, and the views of Americans overall. And so I do think that there are these differences pieces and one of the things that we asked, we're actually a few years ago in Kuwait we were able to ask the question, you know, what do you think of people from China? And it was the only country that we asked this question. It was a question that was designed for the Gulf where there was a bit more attraction. And half of the people said we don't know. We don't actually have any opinion. And I do think it kind of goes back to thinking through how does a country come about? And the United States is very well known, for example, I mean, it's been obviously there for many years, and I think we can kind of track that. And that is part of the reason of this report. We try to compare the United States to China to think about the difference between these two global powers that have a lot of the same things. They have a lot of economic power, they have a lot of political power if they choose to use it, and so on. And so

trying to think about the two in comparison and how that plays out. But it is something that I think is almost too complex and everyone has a slightly different view of what they're thinking of the United States, as a culture. We have seen the positive view and certainly, we can see this politically, like in Morocco after the US recognition of Western Sahara in exchange for the peace deal with Israel, we did see a bump for the United States politically, and again, part of that is also hard to measure in the United States with the change of government. We have also seen that President Trump was very unpopular in the region. Biden is significantly more popular and not necessarily all that popular, but it is almost on par in most countries we see slightly below but still, and mean is something that they try to think about the changes over time of how that plays out and our general sense is that for China it really is coming down to the economy. I'm not sure we're seeing the movement, but it is something that isn't necessarily defined in terms of engagement for the United States. I think that so much of what we hear about, as we do these surveys, is about the Palestinian-Israeli issue. I mean, and just as we think about the United States, its engagement in recent years, that is such a defining piece of the United States' engagement in the region or the wars in the countries that I think even if the United States does more economically, it's still going to struggle to overcome that kind of political past. Whereas China, I think insofar as it can actually stay out of politics effectively, it really, I think, will be defined by its economic engagement in the region. And certainly, it tries to say we're not involved, it tries to say these things, but obviously, there is an engagement. I mean, it certainly does play a role behind the scenes, even as its economic choices, and what it makes. So I think a lot of that will become what defines China. And I think there is the other possibility that there are these other issues. And I think having spent some time there, I mean, there does seem to be when China comes in to do an infrastructure project, it does seem like it's a bit removed from the process. It's kind of, you know, set up to the side, not necessarily, you know, engaging the local workforce to the same extent as maybe one that was done from a company outside of that might do. Again, that's just some presumption that we don't have data on that specifically asking about it. But it is something that does seem like China setting itself up a little bit aside and not necessarily engaging as much. And so I don't know if there is more engagement with Chinese citizens and people of the region, how that will actually play out when a lot of that is yet to be determined. But I think that those interactions, particularly if we do bring down the number of people who say or if we do break down, but if it's the number of people who say that they don't have an opinion of Chinese people does decrease. Certainly, the engagement and how those interactions go will largely define, I think, how China is viewed in the region going forward. So I think there are a lot of different factors here that will help define it. But certainly, my own assessment is that probably in the next ten years, China will really come into view from the Middle East and there will probably be slightly more fixed views of China itself. And then thinking about how I don't think we'll see the shifts that we have seen in this last kind of four-year period anymore that probably well, something major happens will be kind of next. But it is, I think, still getting the new phase of this engagement and most of the region. So it is a bit hard to say. It's something that we will actually go back to in the next wave to continue to dig and try to figure out what it is the people have in mind when they hear the word China, basically.

Jonathan Fulton: Well, I certainly can't wait for the next wave. I mean, every time one of these reports comes out, me and my little band of China media nerds get together on WhatsApp or whatever, and we're like, Oh, have you seen it yet? And you know, give us a lot to talk about.

Michael Robbins: Thank you so much, Jonathan. It's great. I really appreciate those kind words.

Jonathan Fulton: Well, thank you. I mean, it really does. It's a tremendous value for a lot of us, you know, not just academics, but I talked to folks who work in policy or media, whatever. And everybody finds this a really, really valuable, you know, product you guys put out. So this latest report came out in August. We're going to put a link to it on our shows page and I really recommend everybody check it out. There's a lot of great data in there to unpack. Everybody should also check out the Arab barometer Twitter feed because you guys post a lot of really interesting links through that as well. Michael, do you have anything else you're working on that you'd like to tell us about or any other things to promote?

Michael Robbins: Well. So we are coming up with data for researchers who are interested before the data set will be available. Microdata that you can download at the end of September. So to encourage you to do that. We're also working. You should watch, as you say, our feed. We have new reports coming out on the environment the first time we've really done a major series on the environment. We have really interesting findings on gender coming out. So, again, somewhat different. We have a and we have a report coming out on the economy. So these will be coming out in the coming weeks. And so certainly watch those Web sites on our website and our Twitter feed and we'll certainly have links to that. But we are excited that we're actually closing up this way. We've finished the survey data and we'll begin doing surveys again next year. So we're kind of beginning the process of new questionnaires so that there are people who are interested. We're always interested to hear ideas, feedback, and different ways we can ask questions. This is really, as you say, a public project. I mean, the data are public and for researchers. So there is an interest in certain topics or different issues that maybe we've covered here or maybe we haven't. We're always happy to talk about that here, feedback from people so we can hopefully do better surveys in the future. So please do reach out to me or our team and we'd be happy to have a discussion.

Jonathan Fulton: Excellent. Well, Michael, thank you so much. I really appreciate this. This has been really enlightening, really useful for us, and I really enjoyed it.

Michael Robbins: Thanks so much. It's good to talk.

Jonathan Fulton: With you and to the audience. Thanks for joining us. Of course. Follow us on social media. Subscribe or view and write to us on iTunes, Spotify, Stitcher or wherever you get your podcasts. I'll see you next episode. Thank you.

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