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ESSAYS ON U.S. POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Beyond Elections

Evolving Arab Public Opinion on Democracy and Human Rights

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Public opinion polling has the unique attribute of offering a window into the often murky question of how a country's citizens, or a subgroup, view a particular issue.* Like any tool, it has its limitations. Nevertheless, it is the best analytic tool available to gauge publics' views of their governments. At its best, public opinion polling can help shape policies and public communications strategies to best match the desires of a people. As such, peering into Arab public opinion on democracy and human rights—two particularly challenging and controversial issues—can be especially informative as the United States navigates policy on these issues.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A close analysis of hard data about current Arab views on democracy and human rights reveals some counterintuitive findings that should help guide U.S. policy in the following ways:

- The United States retains an edge as the one foreign power that "can best promote democracy in our country," with plurality ratings in every Arab state polled recently (Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates). Surprisingly, however, other countries, including Russia, are not far behind in some places polled.

- What Arab publics want most from democracy is not elections but other integral elements: less corruption, better services, more effective governance, greater individual freedoms, and economic opportunity.

- In fact, it is precisely in those Arab states where comparatively free elections have been held lately—Tunisia, Lebanon, and Iraq—that publics are increasingly dissatisfied with their own governments relative to other stable countries polled.

- And it is in those relatively democratic countries where more people support mass protests today. In the original Arab Spring countries such as Egypt and Bahrain, and in Jordan and the Gulf states, views on the benefits of protest are split.

- More broadly, frustration with legislative institutions and with corruption is high throughout the Arab world. But different Arab populations hold distinct views on how these challenges affect other aspects of governance.

- One important common denominator is a decline in popular support for Islamist parties and movements, as measured by numerous surveys in Arab states. The Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, Hezbollah, Tunisia's Ennahda, and similar contenders have lost a considerable portion of their earlier appeal.

- Moreover, the proportions who want to "interpret Islam in a more moderate, tolerant, and modern direction" now make up large minorities of the Arab Gulf states polled, at around 30%–40%.

Democracy and human rights have been a repeat feature of U.S. public messaging to the Arab world. American rhetoric emphasizing support for sovereignty in the Middle East dates back to the 1957 Eisenhower Doctrine.[1] After the 9/11 attacks, however, President George W. Bush framed his call for democracy as a dramatic policy shift: "Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe, because in the long run stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty."[2] Bush instead characterized his approach as promoting a "global democratic revolution."

The ensuing actions by the Bush administration have since been maligned on both sides of the aisle. Yet a commitment to democracy and human rights promotion has remained a persistent facet of U.S. diplomatic messaging during much of the subsequent two decades. Its framing ranges from former president Barack Obama's promise to "support transitions to democracy" in the infancy of the Arab Spring to President Joe Biden's December 2021 "Summit for Democracy"—though only one country covered in this study, Iraq, made it onto the invited participants list.[3] These statements are often predicated on the assumption that U.S. promotion of democracy and human rights has popular support in Arab states and acts as a type of soft power.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken expressed this sentiment in his inaugural speech, arguing that the flaws of democracy and society at home are no obstacle to U.S. support for these values abroad. On the contrary, he said, they are all the more reason for the United States to work with others to shore up common foundations of freedom. Specifically, he stated that the U.S. government "will encourage others to make key reforms, overturn bad laws, fight corruption, and stop unjust practices. We will incentivize democratic behavior."[4] Blinken also placed limits on the extent of these policies, asserting that the United States would no longer intervene to install democracy by force.

Determining the actual regional public reception of these statements and the resulting policies has proved tricky. Moreover, the way this promised support looks on the ground can often differ widely from how it is imagined or presented back in Washington. In addition, various state and substate actors have a vested interest in defining, or redefining, these terms for Arab publics. The United States is far from the only power using this language to couch its policies in the Arab world.

Autocrats, for example, are likely to emphasize the relativity of such values. During a meeting with the European Union in the Egyptian resort city of Sharm al-Sheikh, Egyptian president Abdul Fattah al-Sisi chastised European Council president (and former Polish prime minister) Donald Tusk, proclaiming: "You are not going to lecture us about humanity. We have our own sense of humanity, values and ethics, and you have your own idea of humanity and ethics, and we respect it. Respect our values and ethics, as we do yours."[5] Arabic-language messaging from Russia and China emphasizes U.S. failures and interventionism in this arena, both real and concocted, that U.S. policy has justified through this rhetoric, while attempting to present themselves as the true protectors of these values.[6]

In some cases, Arab media outlets have echoed accusations by U.S. rivals about American hypocrisy on these issues. Strong suspicions regarding the true intentions of foreign-funded NGOs are just one area where U.S. efforts can be cast in the historical framework of colonialism and imperialism.

Washington Institute polling suggests that Arab publics are listening to all these messages, and drawing mixed conclusions. Russia, in particular, has been successful in its efforts. When polled in March 2022 on which of three great powers—the United States, Russia, or China—"can best promote human rights and democracy in our country," a plurality (ranging from 33%–46%) of respondents in all countries listed the United States. Yet 21%–29% of respondents in each country saw Russia as best fulfilling this role, while another

20%–30% opted for unlisted alternatives—generally in Europe or the Gulf (see figure 1).

Also informing Arab publics' views on these issues is internal messaging. Elections in Syria happen, for example, despite being a sham designed only to reinforce the Assad regime's grip on power. In the bargain, the opposition candidate walks away with a few percentage points of the vote.

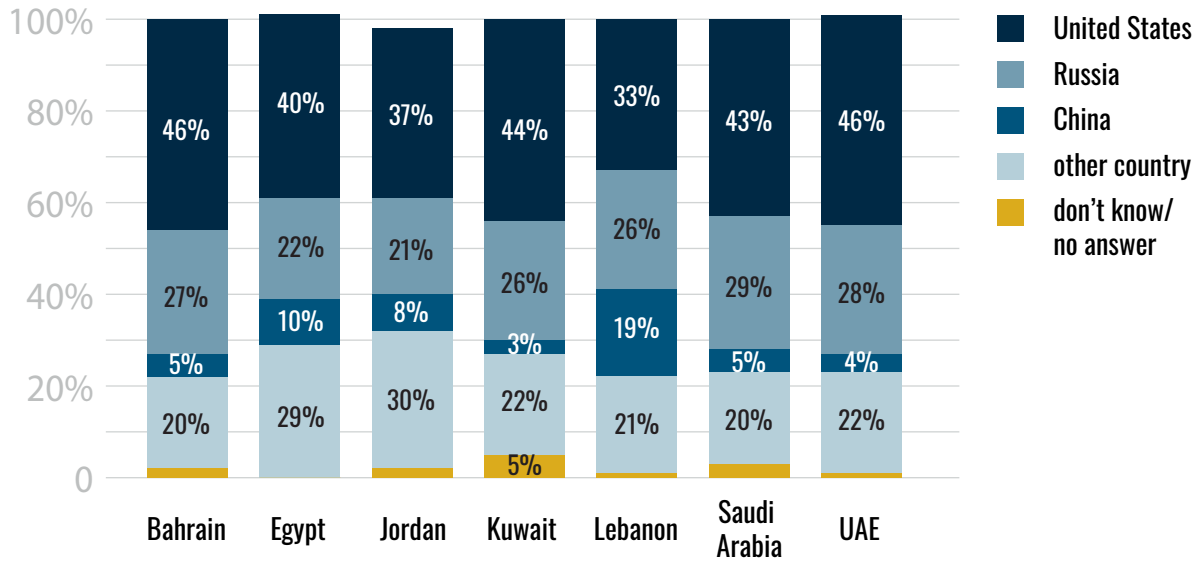
Not all attempts to claim legitimacy through a popular mandate are so brazenly disingenuous. In Tunisia, long considered the standout Arab Spring success story only to backslide toward authoritarianism, President Kais Saied billed an online referendum as an exercise in democracy. But responses were linked to respondents' national identity numbers, raising fears among democracy stakeholders that the government could identify opponents of Saied's proposed consolidation of presidential powers after establishing emergency rule and ousting the country's elected parliament. Neither the Syrian nor the Tunisian example presents the electoral process—often considered a cornerstone of democracy—in an especially positive light, except perhaps for backers of the sitting government.

As Arab publics navigate these competing visions of "democracy" and "human rights," polling shows a range of ideas in different countries, but several broader trends nonetheless emerge. The first is that most Arab publics are more concerned with good governance than with the institutional trappings of democratic institutions, such as elections and legislative bodies. Publics recognize endemic corruption throughout the region, and the deep economic pressures they face are often paramount.

At least half of all publics polled in the latest Arab Barometer poll, drawing on data sets from October 2021–July 2022, assert that "democratic systems may have problems, yet they are better than other systems."[7] Still, attitudes and expectations in both democratic and nondemocratic countries differ, even with respect to what institutions are most central to a democracy. One should not assume public consensus on the value of democracy, or on how human rights should be implemented.

Nor are the region's nominal democracies faring especially well. Consider here the earlier-mentioned case of Tunisia, along with Lebanon and Iraq. The latter two, despite sharing features of Western democracies, could be described as

Figure 1.
March 2022:
Which country can best promote human rights and democracy in our country?



Source: Washington Institute.

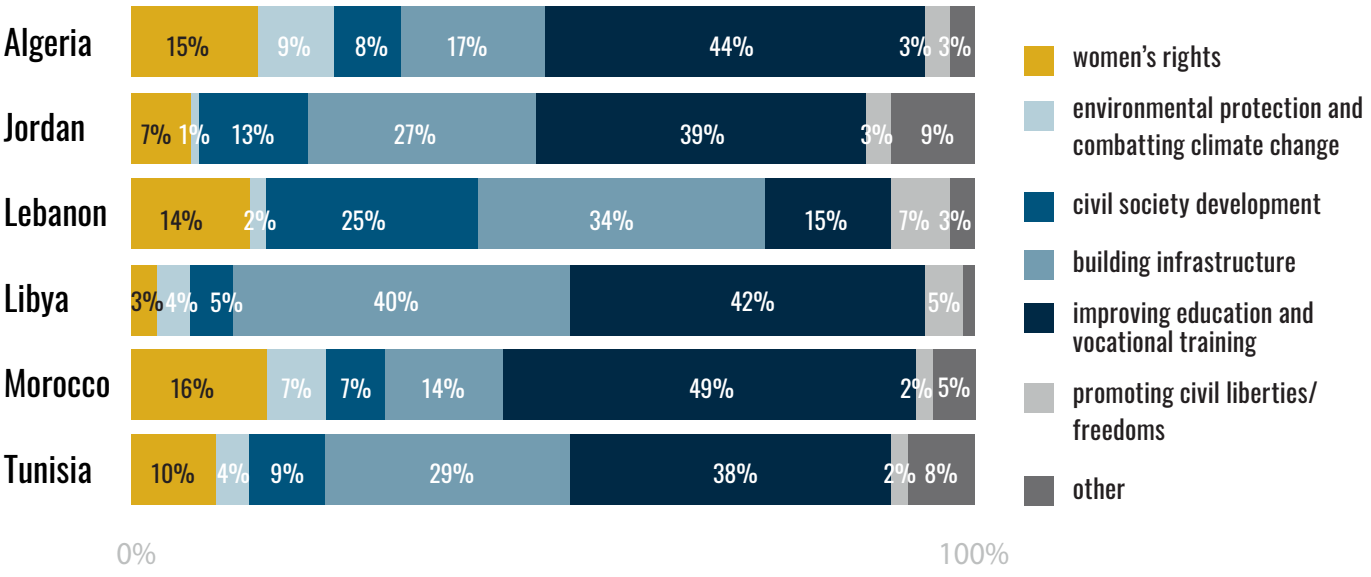
verging on state failure. All three countries are facing deep economic crises and are desperate for political change, while facing entrenched "deep state" power structures that elections have proved unable to unseat. Relative electoral transparency has failed to prevent severe governmental dysfunction, and citizens have paid the price. In more functional systems, meanwhile, such as Jordan and Morocco, citizens tend to seek gradual but concrete change toward better and more representative government, although frustration with corruption or legislative failures is likewise evident.

The question then becomes about how U.S. policy should address these key questions, if at all. Here, mixed Arab views of the United States come into play. In Washington Institute polling, whereas a plurality of respondents see the United States as best suited to support issues of "democracy and human rights," 41%–59% either somewhat or strongly agreed with the assertion that "our country cannot count on the United States these days, so we should look more to Russia or China as partners."[8]

Nor is there a consensus regarding where democracy promotion should rank among U.S. efforts in the region, according to late 2021 Institute polling. When asked to consider four options, about a quarter of most Arab publics polled respond that the United States should make promoting democracy and human rights its top priority, continuing a trend from the past several years when formulated with different options.

When the question of foreign aid arises, the majority of Arab Barometer respondents say it is intended to help soft power "influence," not ordinary citizens. Yet respondents express clear views on where they would like foreign aid to be focused (see figure 2). According to Arab Barometer, pluralities in most countries prefer, by a wide margin, that aid be directed to "improving education and vocational training" or "building infrastructure" over "promoting civil liberties/freedoms." Only in Lebanon is there any significant support for "civil society development." It is vocational and infrastructure aid—combined with the association of economic stability with democracy suggested by a number of polls—that appears to be the crowd-pleaser. The United States should take these views into account when exercising soft power in the region.

Figure 2.
To which of the following areas would you most prefer foreign aid be dedicated?



Source: Arab Barometer poll, wave VI, part 3, 2021.

// Methodology

Several organizations have tracked public opinion on questions related to human rights and democracy. In drawing together these polls, this paper's methodology needed to meet two main criteria: (1) sample sizes of 1,000 per country and (2) exclusion of less reliable polling methods such as online interviews. This paper thus draws on Washington Institute polling conducted from 2014 to August 2022.

Over this eight-year period, The Washington Institute has conducted its polling in Arab countries through a consumer research firm. Respondents to each survey constitute a representative national sample of 1,000 citizens via in-person interviews using standard geographic probability sampling procedures and assurances of confidentiality. Also included in this study are 2020–22 polling data sets from the Arab Barometer, an independent firm based in Princeton, New Jersey, with multiple affiliates abroad. And in the interest of providing more detailed single-country data, polling spanning 2014–22 from the International Republican Institute (IRI) in Jordan and from IIACSS in Iraq, a firm led by Munqith Dagher, is likewise included.

The polls also include cross-tabulation by demographic subcategories, specifically age and religious affiliation. The findings have typically shown little statistically significant difference on questions related to democracy and human rights when data is subdivided into younger and older age groups (18–29 and 30-plus cohorts)—a trend supported in Arab Barometer cross-tabulations. Notable differences between religious communities are noted where relevant.

Polling accessibility also varies highly by country. Palestinian polling, for example, has distinguished itself over decades of data and has enjoyed at least grudging Palestinian Authority acceptance. Jordan likewise stands out, with the kingdom carefully monitoring polling efforts. Popular surveys in the Gulf states, by contrast, have posed more of a challenge, with data therefore harder to come by. In the most forbidding countries, like Syria, polling efforts are simply impossible. As such, the only Arab publics excluded entirely from the discussion are Syria, Yemen, and Oman.

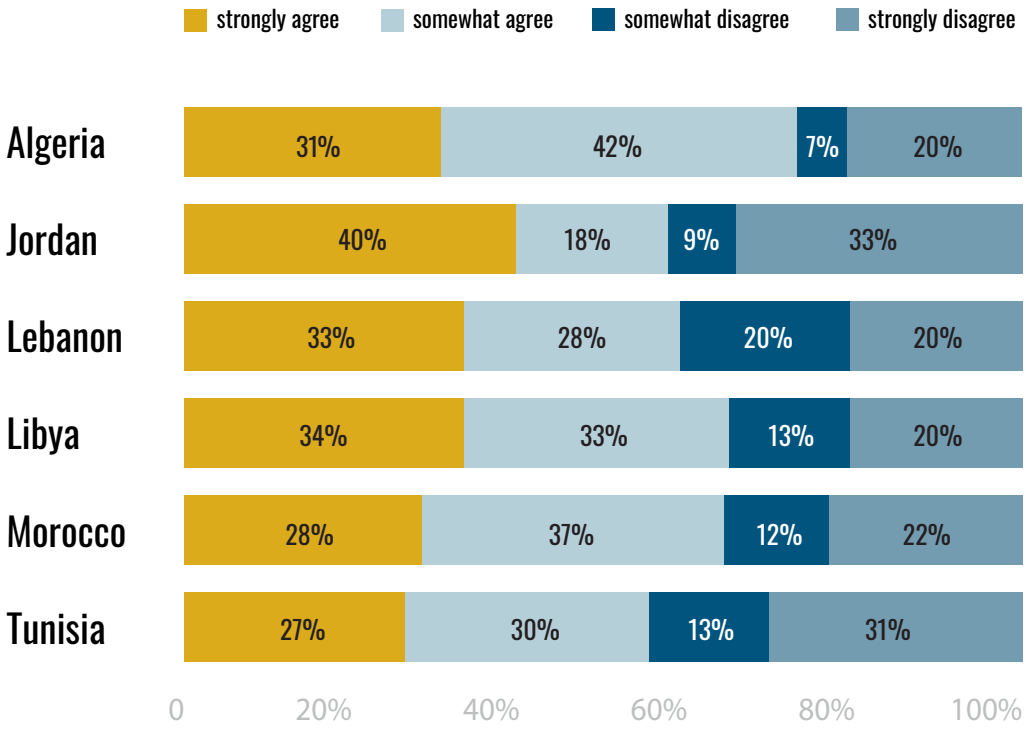
// Measuring Trust

To get a better sense of what exactly Arab publics want in democratic systems, one must first gain some understanding of how they perceive the role of democracy in their daily lives. In 2021, the Arab Barometer poll asked Arab publics to explore the "essential characteristics" of democracy, with majorities ranking as "essential" equal rights, free elections, and the government's ability to meet people's basic needs (see figure 3).

The Arab Barometer and the Arab Opinion Index—housed by the Doha-based Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies—also display unexpected countervailing trends on the question of how Arab publics see their own governments. When Arab Opinion Index respondents were asked in 2019–20 to rank the democratic credentials of their own countries, responses differed sharply from those on more traditional metrics of

Figure 3.

As long as the government can maintain order and stability in the country, it does not matter whether it is democratic or undemocratic.



Source: Arab Barometer poll, wave VI, part 2, 2020.

democracy as measured from the outside. Of the nationals polled, Saudi respondents gave their country the highest assessment of democracy in the Arab Opinion Index (7.7 of 10), effectively tying Qatar (7.5). In the last Arab Barometer poll to include Saudi Arabia, in 2011, a similarly high proportion of Saudi respondents agreed that their country had strong democratic credentials.

Stability also figured prominently in responses on democracy. More than half of respondents in all countries polled by Arab Barometer in 2021—Jordan, Lebanon, Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia—agreed that it did not matter whether their country was democratic, "as long as the government can maintain order and stability."

Such numbers do not tell the whole story, however. Whereas Arab publics have demonstrated a clear willingness to share their frustrations in public opinion polling, respondents in the Arab Opinion Index also report that they cannot voice these frustrations publicly. Thirty percent of Arab Opinion Index respondents said it was impossible to criticize their governments, with the lowest rankings (least able to criticize) found in Saudi Arabia (3.9) and the Palestinian territories (4.6) and the highest in pre–July 25 (2021) Tunisia (6.9), before President Saied suspended the country's elected parliament. Likewise, in July 2020 Washington Institute polling, pluralities of Egyptians (68%), Jordanians (43%), Saudis (58%), and Emiratis (49%) all agreed that their countries paid too little attention to "public opinion about its policies." Nevertheless, the following polling demonstrates that many anonymous respondents will indeed critique their governments—even on sensitive issues. Such responses help give weight to others that may appear unexpectedly laudatory.

For example, respondents to Washington Institute polls repeatedly emphasize the importance of political and economic reforms. When asked whether these reforms are "more important for our country than any foreign policy issue," thereby justifying the avoidance of any wars, majorities in every country have agreed since first being polled in 2017. On this question, support in the Gulf countries of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia likewise increased between 2017 and 2021.

Apparent contradictions can be traced to a deep-seated frustration among Arab publics about governance issues, with Lebanese respondents expressing their exasperation most acutely even before the country's slide toward economic collapse intensified in fall 2019. Institute polling indicates that while Lebanese may be sharply divided on many other issues, they almost universally express the view that Beirut has for years done "too little" to address its governance challenges—including what the World Bank has since labeled a "Ponzi scheme" of public finance causing "unprecedented social and economic pain."[9]

Views on governance can improve depending in part on a country's economic circumstances, with a split observable in Egypt and Jordan and greater satisfaction registered in the Gulf, where the UAE and Qatar earn the highest marks. (On the related matter of corruption, attitudes in Gulf countries are significantly less sanguine, as discussed later.)

The Arab Barometer—which provides more data on North Africa and less on the Gulf—generally confirms such impressions where overlaps occur. According to the data, about half of respondents in Algeria, Jordan, and Libya reported overall satisfaction with their countries' governance, topped by Morocco's 72%. On the downside, at least three quarters of Lebanese, Tunisians, and Iraqis reported being "dissatisfied," with half or more marking "completely dissatisfied."

In Lebanon, Tunisia, and Iraq, a lack of trust in governing bodies focuses especially on legislative institutions. In the Arab Barometer poll, majorities in the three countries reported having "no trust at all" in their government's "council of ministers." In Algeria, 42% of respondents responded likewise. And while fewer Jordanians (37%) express no trust at all in their legislative body, overall expectations remain low among most. Ninety-two percent of respondents to a 2021 IRI poll assessed that their parliament had not recorded *any* accomplishments in the past year for which it should be commended.[10] Such views stand in contrast to those in Morocco and, surprisingly, Libya, where about half report having "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of trust in these institutions.[11]

Further spotlighting dissatisfaction with governance are Arab respondents' more positive views about Arab legal systems and militaries. Setting aside Lebanese skepticism about their legal system, a much larger number of Tunisians (40%) express a good deal of trust in their legal systems over government, although President Saied's attempt to enact wide-ranging court dismissals and establish new presidential powers to appoint judges may erode this trust.[12] Similar findings apply to Iraq, according to March 2022 IIACSS polling, with almost half of respondents reporting trust in judges versus just 21% saying the same about parliament.[13] Most Jordanians voice positive attitudes about their courts, with 73% registering trust. Support for armed forces remains stronger still, with a span of 67% (Libya) to 96% (Jordan) of publics polled by the Arab Barometer feeling "quite a lot of trust" in their national militaries.

Returning to the legislative conundrum in Jordan, more granular data from 2019 IRI polling offers insights into what is driving disaffection. Here, a striking 99% of those surveyed report not being affiliated with a political party or movement, reflecting deep alienation from the political process. Moreover, by 2021, 80% did not believe elections "accurately reflect the will

of the Jordanian people." And 63% said they would "definitely not vote" if parliamentary elections were held tomorrow—up from 50% in 2019. Views on local elections fare slightly better, with about half of respondents (52%) reporting they would boycott them. And of these potential boycotters, about half said their position arose from the view that "nothing will change."

Iraqi respondents evince a similarly profound lack of agency regarding the political process. Early elections in October 2021 emerged from popular pressure, which might be expected to translate into optimism regarding reform. Yet IIACSS polling in the months before the vote showed that even among those who believed ordinary Iraqis could influence their country's decisionmaking process, only 14% of Sunni, 11% of Shia, and 31% of Kurdish respondents saw voting as a way to do so.[14] A stark reality on the ground today has vindicated these suspicions. Even as many lauded the elections as the cleanest in Iraq's history, the government-formation process has proven disastrous, marred by deepening sectarianism, violent protests, and a government now forming only a year later.

In the Palestinian territories, the lack of elections despite repeated promises from political leaders is a point of ongoing public frustration. Gazans in particular express strong support for holding elections in Washington Institute polling, and majorities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem voice a similar desire. Such views do not imply a vote of confidence in the political system, however, with the majority of Palestinians believing they should push harder against PA and Hamas corruption.

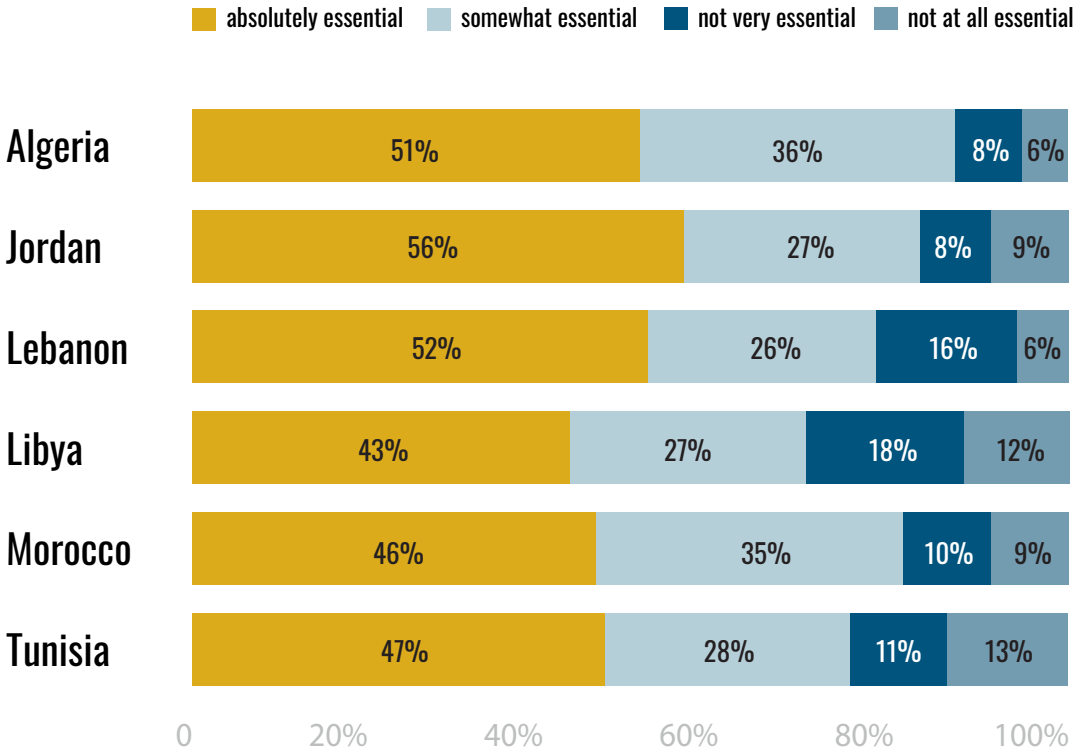
// The Deep Challenges of Economic Hardship and Corruption

Arab publics perceive economic challenges as central in limiting the advancement of democratic freedoms, according to poll respondents (see figure 4). To a significant degree, the compact between postcolonial Arab governments and their peoples has relied on economic guarantees, including strong subsidies for basic foodstuffs and a public sector that functions as the primary national employer. That this public expectation continues is confirmed by the Arab Barometer poll's data on the importance of basic governmental economic support in democracies.

Here, however, many governments are failing. Food security has been a persistent challenge in the Arab world, long before the Russian invasion of Ukraine sharply decreased the global supply of available basic foodstuffs. In 2021, 47% of respondents to the Arab Barometer poll of non-Gulf countries stated that it was sometimes or often true that "the food we bought did not last and we did not have money to get more." Large majorities in Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Tunisia see the current economic situation in their country as bad. (Moroccans and, more surprisingly, Libyans are somewhat more sanguine.)

It is notable that these views corresponded to some degree with attitudes toward governance overall. Moroccans were both more likely to have trust in their government and to express optimism as to their economic circumstances. Lebanese, Tunisian, and Iraqi publics reported overwhelming frustration with both their economic and governance situations. Even in Jordan, where numbers are not as bleak, many respondents directly correlated the two. When

Figure 4.
Essential characteristics of democracy: basic necessities like food, clothes, and shelter are provided for all.



Source: Arab Barometer poll, wave VI, part 2, 2020.

asked in 2019 by IRI to what extent the country's current economic situation was "an obstacle to the development of democracy," 76% of Jordanians reported that it affected democracy to a large extent.[15]

More Jordanians believed that these economic circumstances had an impact than other likely culprits. By comparison, 56% cited "lack of political will" or "external pressure not to have democracy in Jordan" as major obstacles. Less than half (43%) cited "lack of civil liberties and political rights" as affecting democracy in a major way. This prioritization of economic over political rights and civil liberties became clearer when respondents were asked to rank what they saw as the strongest obstacle to democracy. The large plurality (43%) again selected "current economic situation," in comparison to just 4% who listed weak civil liberties and political rights.[16]

Frustration with economic circumstances extends into some parts of the Gulf in a way other governance concerns do not. When asked in Washington Institute polling in October 2019 and again in November 2021, the plurality of respondents in all countries except the UAE and Qatar believed their country had done too little to deal with "economic problems and daily hardships." While this number had dipped slightly in Egypt from 53% to 47%, Saudi Arabia (38%), Bahrain (42%), Jordan (54%), and Lebanon (96%) remained statistically equivalent within the two-year period. A plurality of Kuwaitis, though only polled on the question in 2019, likewise agreed (45%) with this statement.

A similar or even higher percentage in each country stated they believed the country did too little to deal with corruption in economics and politics. Whereas only 11% of Qataris

expressed that the country was doing too little on economic issues, 30% agreed that too little had been done on corruption. The percentage of those concerned about corruption also jumped in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia relative to those who voiced economic concerns—56% in each country agreed that too little was being done on corruption. When polled in 2019, 61% of Kuwaitis likewise expressed this opinion.

These results spotlight the high level of frustration with corruption almost across the board—about half of Jordanians, Egyptians, Bahrainis, and Saudis (along with 97% of Lebanese) agree that this is an underaddressed problem. In June 2022, many Palestinians likewise agreed with the more direct proposal that they should "push harder to replace their own political leaders with more effective and less corrupt ones"; 63% of West Bank and 79% of Gaza Palestinians somewhat or strongly agreed that this should be the case. Moreover, these attitudes are corroborated by surveys from the Arab Barometer poll.

Only in Morocco has the Arab Barometer poll found that fewer than half of respondents believe corruption exists at the national level "to a large extent." Among some Gulf respondents, meanwhile, attitudes toward the government's approach to corruption are becoming more sanguine. The proportion of those in the Emirates who believe the government is doing too little dropped from 35% in 2019 to 28% in 2021, and in Saudi Arabia from 63% to 56% during the same period.

Notably, Moroccan respondents' relatively positive views on the kingdom's governance model—along perhaps with obvious challenges elsewhere in the region—appear to correlate with shifting public views of democracy. Morocco does have elections and a parliament, and the kingdom characterizes itself as a constitutional monarchy whose constitution includes reforms driven by the Arab Spring protests. Yet the system continues to provide the monarchy with wide-reaching powers.

The most recent tranche of Arab Barometer poll data, released in July 2022, indicates that Moroccans have become much less interested in democracy as a governance model.[17] Although, as recently as 2016, 79% of Moroccans reported believing that democratic systems are "better than other systems," this figure had dropped 25 points by 2022. So while half of Moroccans still agree with this statement, they now stand alone among Arab publics polled on the question as being truly split on the value of democracy—the next lowest is Egypt, where 65% of respondents still agree with this view.

// Human Rights and Legal Protections

Economic concerns are clearly high across the region, but polling data indicates that respondents also see human rights as important. In IRI Jordan polls, "human rights" ranks with "employment" as a top area for potential policy reforms, with more than a quarter of respondents listing it as the most important. These views can extend to how respondents themselves believe they are treated by the government. For example, few Iraqis from any demographic background—Sunni (31%), Kurdish (24%), or Shia (18%)—report feeling that the government treats them fairly and equitably, with these figures having declined rapidly from previous years.[18]

Successive U.S. administrations have indeed made supporting human rights, whether minority, gender, or political opposition, a

frequent talking point and sometimes a policy condition in relations with the Middle East. Yet when choosing which human rights issues to focus on, U.S. policymakers must grapple with the reality that some will prove more popular than others, and that there are certain issues on which U.S. involvement would be irrelevant or even counterproductive.

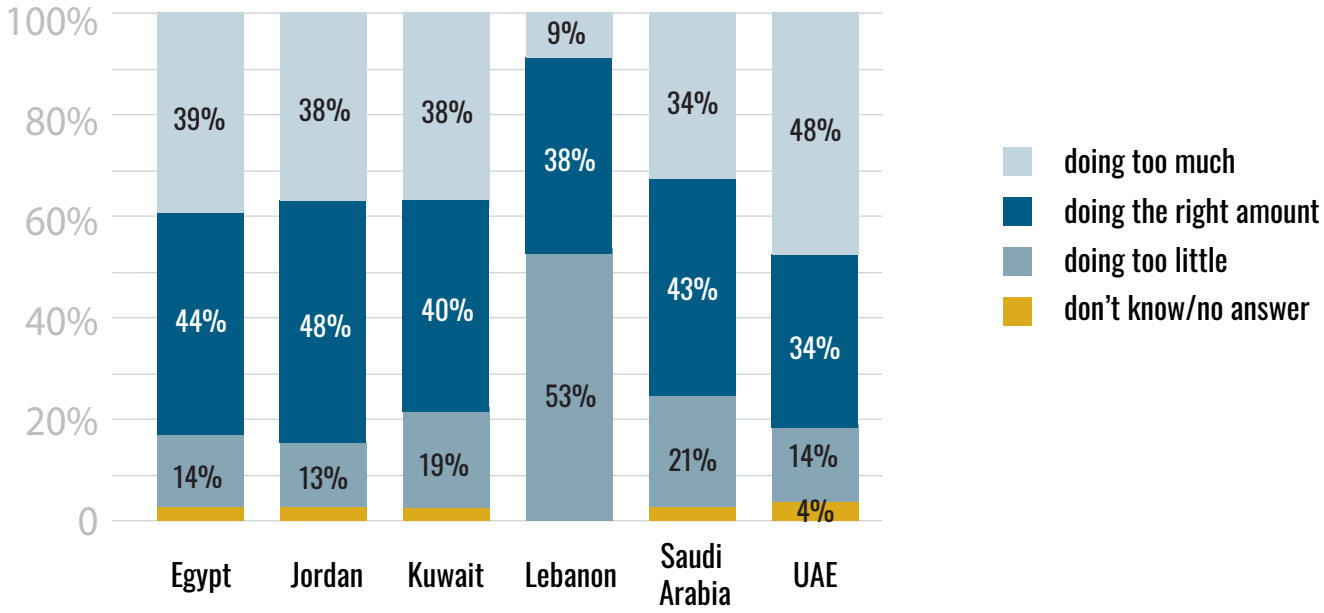
One point of potential miscommunication involves women's rights, with Middle East publics not necessarily aligned with U.S. perceptions of which countries should be pushed on gender equality (see figure 5). Specifically, it is Lebanese rather than Saudi citizens who are most likely to believe their country is doing too little to protect women's rights, according to Washington Institute polling. Fifty-three percent of Lebanese thought this way, in contrast to 21% of Saudis. Moreover, Lebanese are the outliers on this question: a large majority of Jordanians (86%), Egyptians (83%), Emiratis (82%), Kuwaitis (78%), and Saudis (77%) believed in 2019 that their country was either doing "about the right amount" or *too much* to promote "opportunity and equality for women." These numbers had held steady from the year prior.

Other polling also reflects ambivalence toward full gender equality, especially on questions relating to politics or personal status law. Fifty-three percent of male respondents and 43% of female respondents to the 2020 Arab Barometer poll agreed at least somewhat with the statement that "in general, men are better at political leadership than women."[19] While the 2021–22 data suggests some shift on this question, majorities in every country but Morocco (49%), Tunisia (40%), and Lebanon (36%) still appear to hold this belief. The breakdown is only slightly better when it comes to agreement with gendered assertions in personal life: "A man should have final say in all decisions concerning the family."[20]

Moreover, in recent years, top-down political inclusion of women has masked moves toward

Figure 5.

October 2019: How is your country dealing with promoting opportunity and equality for women?



Source: Washington Institute.

governmental consolidation even as it gestures toward equality. When consolidating his power, for instance, Tunisia's President Saied brought the country's first female prime minister to power, while Egypt's President Sisi repeatedly points to female representation in a parliament apparently lacking any real legislative power.[21]

Such attitudes can have a negative impact on efforts toward inclusion in politics. In 2012 in Algeria, a historic number of women filled parliamentary seats to meet newly established gender quotas. However, their lack of previous formal political experience lead to a popular backlash against what was labeled the "coiffeur parliament," and female representation has since fallen precipitously after the quota system was dropped.[22]

Popular views on equality in personal status issues can also vary greatly. Jordanians in 2019 IRI polling overwhelmingly support men and women having equal rights in initiating divorce, and agree that a woman can reject an arranged marriage. On the other hand, both men and women overwhelmingly reject a law preventing men from marrying more than one woman. And 72% of women and 76% of men likewise strongly disagree that women's inheritance should equal men's inheritance.

Nor do Arab publics seem to think U.S. promotion of gender equality is effective. When asked in a 2020 Arab Barometer poll to what extent U.S. aid "advances women's rights," respondents who believed it did not at all outstripped those saying it did "to a great extent" in every country surveyed.

This does not mean that U.S. promotion of gender equality in Arab countries is unimportant, or that popular support does not exist for particular reforms. It does suggest, however, that focusing on certain aspects of gender equality will find a larger base of support than other aspects. Polling data also suggests that a focus on women's rights will have more broad-based public support in some countries over others.

Patterns are also visible regarding how citizens from Arab countries view individual freedoms and privacy (see figure 6). Washington Institute polling between 2018 and 2021 asked respondents to gauge their country's performance with regard to "protecting the freedoms and privacy of individual citizens." During this span, Lebanese who believed their country was doing *too little* jumped by 30 points (reaching 87%), while Jordanians' response leapt 40 points (to 52%). Egypt remained stable at about 43%. By contrast, in Gulf countries for which trends are available, shifts occurred in the opposite direction: in Saudi Arabia, down from 36% to 29%, and in the UAE, from 33% to 26%.

Certain religious groups do view the United States as a protective force, according to 2022 Washington Institute polling. For example, significant proportions of Egypt's Christian minority (40%) and Lebanese Sunnis and Christians (40%–50%) "strongly disagree" when asked if they would prefer to turn to China or Russia because the United States could no longer be trusted.

Arab publics also appear to support better relations with "the world's Christians." Majorities in Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE agreed in 2019 that "we should show more respect...and improve our relations with them." Attitudes were much different in response to the same question regarding Jews, with at least 85% of each public disagreeing. However, later Gulf-based data from after the Abraham Accords—the 2020 pacts signed by Israel with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Sudan, along with a separate but parallel agreement with Morocco—suggests a softening in parts of the Gulf on sports and business relations with Israelis, and potentially with other Jews as well.[23]

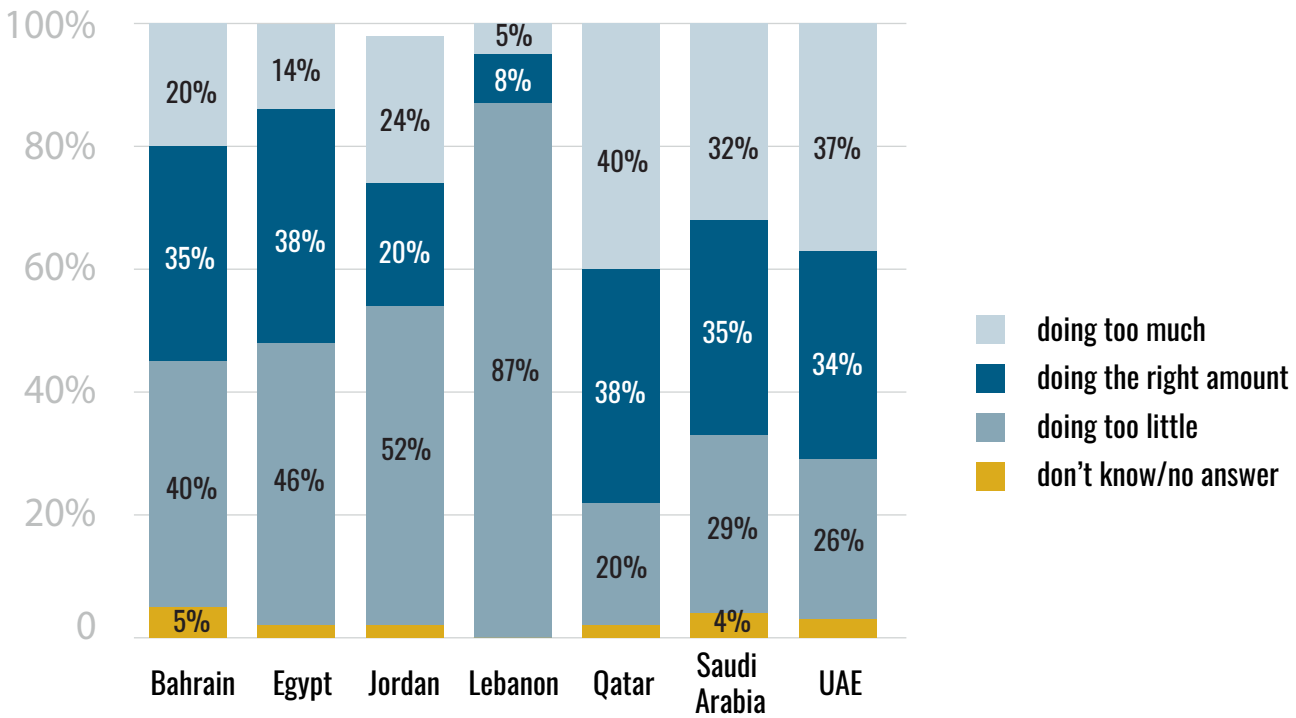
// Islamist Decline

Moreover, Arab majorities do not report viewing Islamist politics as a viable alternative. But when asked whether one should "listen to those among us who want to interpret Islam in a more moderate, modern, and tolerant way," responses differ greatly by country. In 2019, such a proposal was not popular in Egypt (21%) or in Saudi Arabia (20%), and only slightly more popular in the UAE (29%). In contrast, 60% of Lebanese agreed—the only such majority recorded. While few in Jordan agreed strongly with this idea, a third reported that they agreed somewhat.

In a Gulf-only poll where the question reappeared some eighteen months later, attitudes had shifted notably in Saudi Arabia. By July 2021, more Saudis reported supporting such an attitude than Emiratis—39% versus 33%. Bahrainis polled during this period were even more supportive, at 51%. This percentage reflects a religious split in the small Gulf kingdom, with Shia respondents much more likely to show support. Greater Shia backing also surfaced in Kuwaiti and Lebanese polling, which showed 17- and 27-point gaps, respectively, between Shia and Sunni responses, and in the UAE—although not, by 2021, in Saudi Arabia. In the Saudi case, closer analysis showed this shift to have occurred principally among Sunnis, with 15% support in 2019 approximately doubling by 2021.

In July/August 2022, Saudi support for the proposal increased even more, rising to 42%, while Emirati support rose to 39%. The statement

Figure 6.
November 2021: How is your country dealing with protecting the freedoms and privacy of individual citizens?



Source: Washington Institute.

remained consistently popular in Bahrain during this polling period (54%), although Shia respondents were again more likely than their Sunni counterparts to agree (58% vs. 48%). As for Egyptian public sentiment, support for the proposal remained limited in July/August 2022, garnering only 23% agreement from respondents.

Notably, reframing the question to focus on religious extremism draws completely different results. Support for efforts against religious extremism was quite high in July 2020—both in Saudi Arabia and in the other countries polled. No more than 14% of any group believed their country was doing too much in this respect. And despite Sisi's consistent public messaging portraying himself as a "law and order" president focused on combating terrorism, 64% of Egyptians believed that the country was doing too little to "prevent religious extremism in our society," compared to about a third of Jordanians, Saudis, or Emiratis who believed the same. Likewise, 59% of Egyptians thought the country was not doing enough to "maintain law and order in our public places." This concern again stands in contrast to relatively sanguine views in those other countries. Muslim and Christian Egyptians expressed effectively equivalent views on these matters.

Support for specific Islamist groups, especially the Muslim Brotherhood, is likewise on the decline. With Islamists targeted by many governments in the wake of the Arab Spring uprisings, their success in early Tunisian and Egyptian elections appeared to suggest popular appeal. Yet positive views toward the Brotherhood have never been in the majority since The Washington Institute first looked at the question in 2014, and have fallen in most countries. Only in Qatar did about a third of respondents continue to express positive views of the Brotherhood by 2020, and further polling of Saudi Arabia and the UAE in mid-2021 reflected an incremental downward trend.

Still, the Brotherhood cannot be dismissed as negligible. Despite being outlawed as a "terrorist organization" in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt, minorities (14% in Saudi Arabia and 18% in the UAE in July 2021, 23% in Egypt when polled in November 2020) still saw this group in a positive light when last polled, with proportions rising to over one-third in Qatar. Palestinian views on the question were split by locale—a majority of Gazans (55%) continued to express positive opinions of the group in February 2020, in contrast to just 18% of West Bank Palestinians.

Hamas's popularity has likewise declined sharply in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Although around half of Saudis and Emiratis supported Hamas in 2014, by July 2021 less than a quarter had even a "somewhat" positive view in either country. However, the Gaza-based group remained relatively popular (43%–47%) when last polled in November 2020 in Jordan, Bahrain, and Qatar. Attitudes among Palestinians themselves are likewise split: in June 2022, about half saw the group in a positive light.

Most striking of all is Hezbollah's lack of mass appeal over the past decade. After its summer 2006 war with Israel, the Lebanese group and its secretary-general, Hassan Nasrallah, were true celebrities across the Arab world, from the Gulf to North Africa.[24] But Hezbollah only experienced its apogee until fighting, at Iran's behest, against not Israel but the Syrian people—and in favor of Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad's vicious yet tottering regime. Ever since this move near the start of the Arab Spring, Hezbollah's approval ratings have languished in the teens or twenties in most Arab societies polled—with the telling exception of Lebanon's Shia community, where the group continues to poll in the eighties.

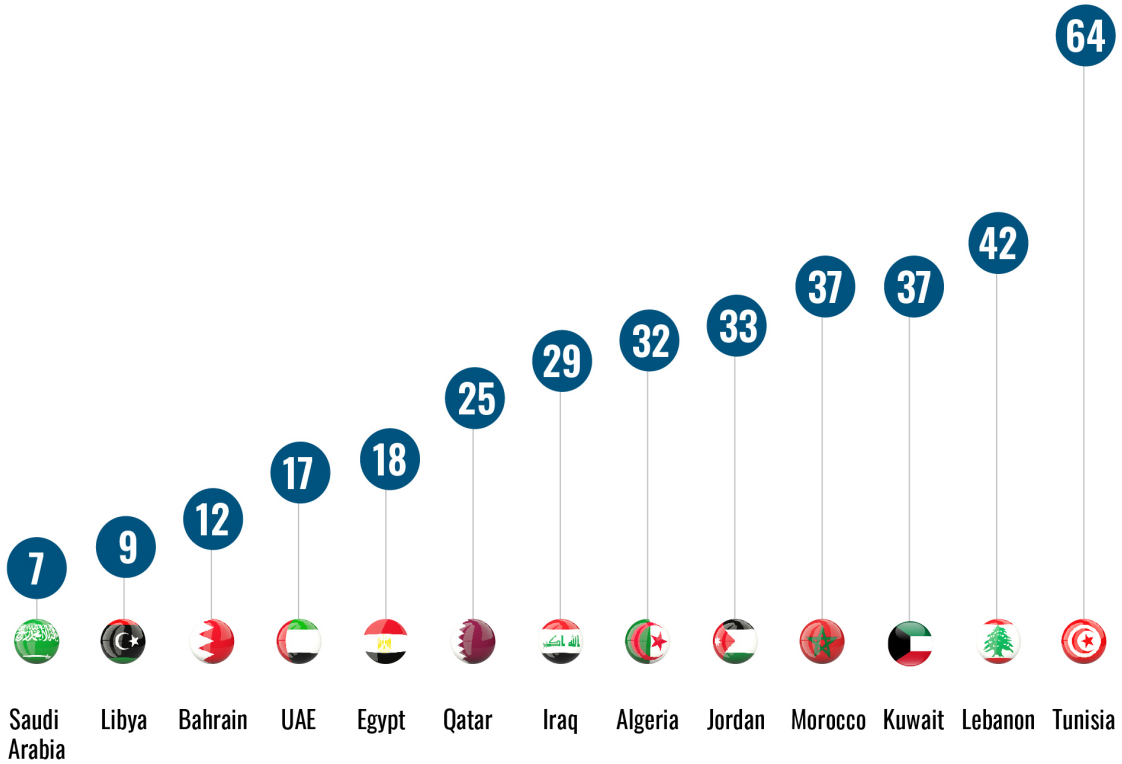
The sum of these polling results, alongside Tunisians' frustration with the Islamist Ennahda-led legislature, indicates a lack of broad-based support for Islamist parties in virtually every country polled, notwithstanding persistent supporters. Here again, governance and rights emerge as preeminent over ideology in Arab respondents' political preferences.

// The Cautionary Tales of Lebanon, Iraq, and Tunisia

That Lebanon repeatedly stands out in sparking citizens' frustration is unsurprising given the economic and governance disasters the country has faced over the past few years. Lebanon also stands out in having seen mass-protest responses to these disasters, showing a real human mobilization behind the polling numbers. Moreover, in Lebanon, international perceptions have failed to compel changes to address the people's governance concerns. Here, independent, credible NGO assessments, such as those published by Freedom House, Transparency International, and others, rank countries on metrics relating to human rights and democracy, via analysts' evaluation of metrics including electoral processes, political participation, freedom of expression, rule of law, and other measures of governance.[25] In particular, a comparison of Freedom House's "Global Freedom Index" findings with public opinion polling can be instructive (see figure 7).[26]

Of all the Arab countries polled, Tunisia and Lebanon rank highest for their freedoms. Another quantitative reference—the Berggruen Governance Index for 2019—likewise places Tunisia at the top, while Lebanon outranks Morocco for quality of life, and Iraq bests Saudi Arabia and Egypt on democracy.[27] Yet clearly, publics in regional index "winners" like Lebanon and Iraq evince dire dissatisfaction reflected in public surveys. In both countries, popular

Figure 7.
2022 Freedom House Global Freedom Scores*



*Based on governance developments in 2021.

movements have targeted corruption and abject governance failures in ostensibly democratic institutions and demanded reform. The events in Tunisia, where support initially emerged for more consolidated rule amid a national crisis, show a different type of trajectory.

By extension, failures in Arab states with nominally stronger democratic institutions appear to be reshaping views about democracy across the Arab world, a dynamic policymakers would be wise to note. In particular, Iraqi support for a democratic system, while still in the majority, has dropped significantly over the past few years. Negative views of a democratic system never exceeded 11% in surveys from 2004, 2009, or 2014. Yet by 2020, rejection reached 40%, as measured by IIACSS.[28] Likewise, when Iraqis were asked in 2020 whether they supported or opposed "a strong leader who does not care about parliament and elections," support had shot up to 66% from just 17% in 2004.

Polling data also demonstrates popular domestic support for protests within Iraq and Lebanon. IIACSS measured that 60% of Iraqis backed the reformist Tishreen movement in 2020, regardless of the ethnic or religious background of respondents.[29] Likewise, in March 2022 Washington Institute polling, Lebanese remained united (at 94%) in their *rejection* of the following assertion: "It's a good thing we don't have big street protests against corruption, as they do in some other Arab countries (or in the past)" (see figure 8 and 9).

Since the 2019 protest movements in Algeria, Sudan, Iraq, and Lebanon, Washington Institute polling has gauged both the popularity of a given movement and interest in domestic anti-corruption protests similar in scope. Jordanians and Egyptians remain split in their views about domestic protests, with 44% of Egyptians and 53% of Jordanians in March 2022 agreeing that the lack of "big street demonstrations" is a good thing, with little change since the question was first asked in July 2020. In separate June 2022 Institute polling, the majority of Palestinians (61% of West Bankers and 65% of Gazans) likewise agreed.[30]

In contrast, in Gulf countries—whose publics are less united in their contempt for national governance—such protests have become significantly less appealing over the past few years. Rejection of the statement in Saudi Arabia and the UAE that "it's a good thing we aren't having big street demonstrations here now" has dropped sharply, with just 18% of Emiratis and 24% of Saudis in March 2022, down from 54% and 48%, respectively, in July 2020. Such proportions match other Gulf countries polled that March, with 20% of Kuwaitis and 30% of Bahrainis disagreeing with the statement. These populations, notably, do perceive governance problems in their countries, with much larger percentages indicating not enough is being done to address them. Nevertheless, anti-corruption protests have lost much of its appeal in the Gulf.

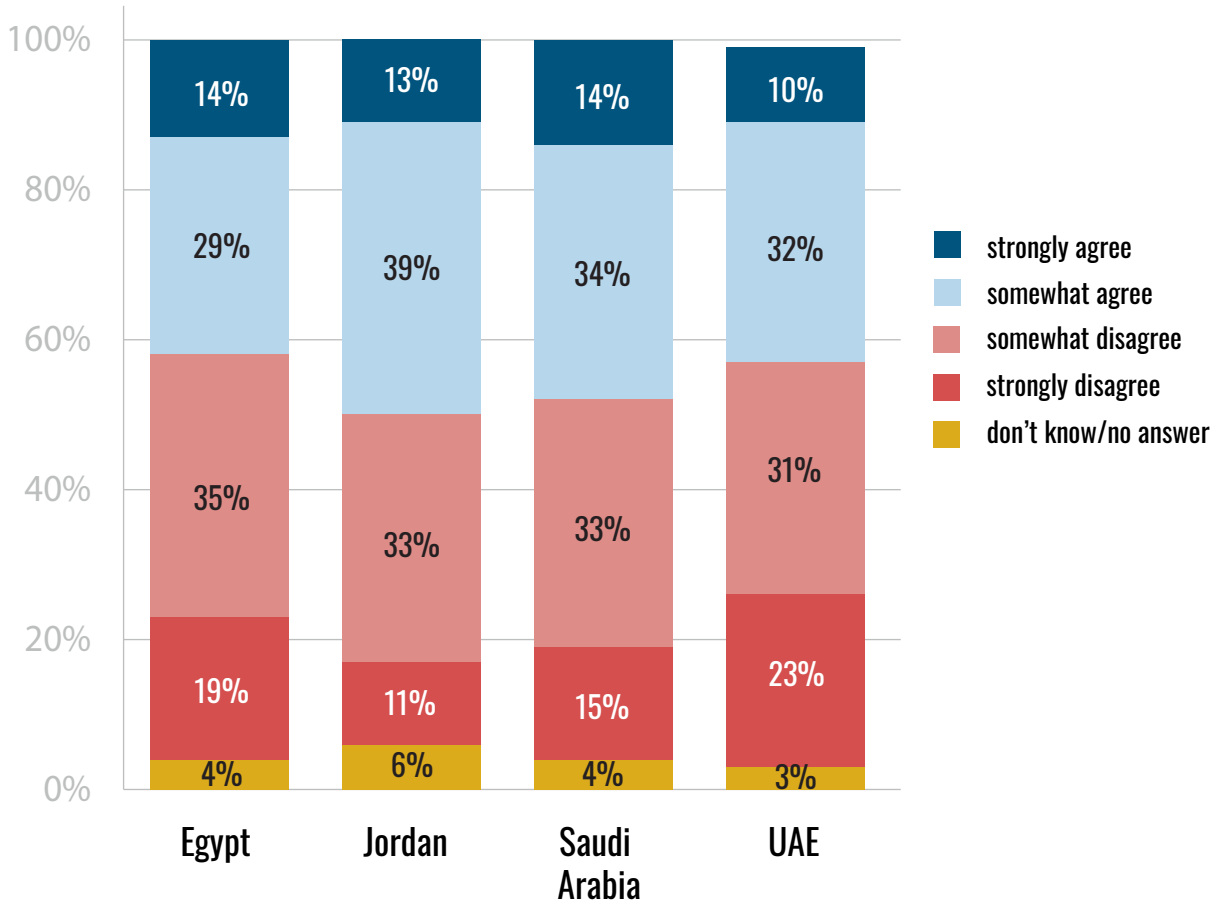
Of course, fear of government backlash may also feature in these attitudes. While polling on publics' views regarding freedom to protest is unavailable from the Gulf, Arab Barometer data emphasizes a spread of views throughout the Levant and North Africa on this question. In 2021, 42% of Jordanians stated that the "freedom to participate in peaceful protests and demonstrations" was "not guaranteed at all," along with a substantial minority of Moroccans (23%), Lebanese (25%), Algerians (30%), and Tunisians (33%). Iraqis, in whose country violence against protesters became a reality, were most likely to voice this opinion, at 55%.[31]

Conversely, popular opinion regarding the movements abroad has improved over time. When initially asked in July 2020 Washington Institute polling, minorities in Egypt (39%), Jordan (41%), Saudi Arabia (24%), and the Emirates (32%) saw the protests themselves in a positive light. When asked again that November, more Egyptians, Saudis, and Emiratis

now responded favorably—52%, 54%, and 52%, respectively. It bears noting that Lebanese were overwhelmingly supportive of their own movement, with 49% feeling very positive and another 39% feeling somewhat positive.

International Republican Institute polling, for its part, reflects concerns about the negative impacts of political rupture. About three-quarters of Jordanians in the 2019 IRI survey thus strongly agreed that political, social, and economic reforms should be "introduced gradually instead of all at once."[32] Moreover, on the question of moving toward a more democratic system, a significant minority expressed ambivalence, with 40% of all respondents to the 2019–20 Arab Opinion Index survey agreeing with the statement "my society is unprepared for democracy," even as 74% overall ranked democratic government as an appropriate system relative to minority support for other forms proposed.[33]

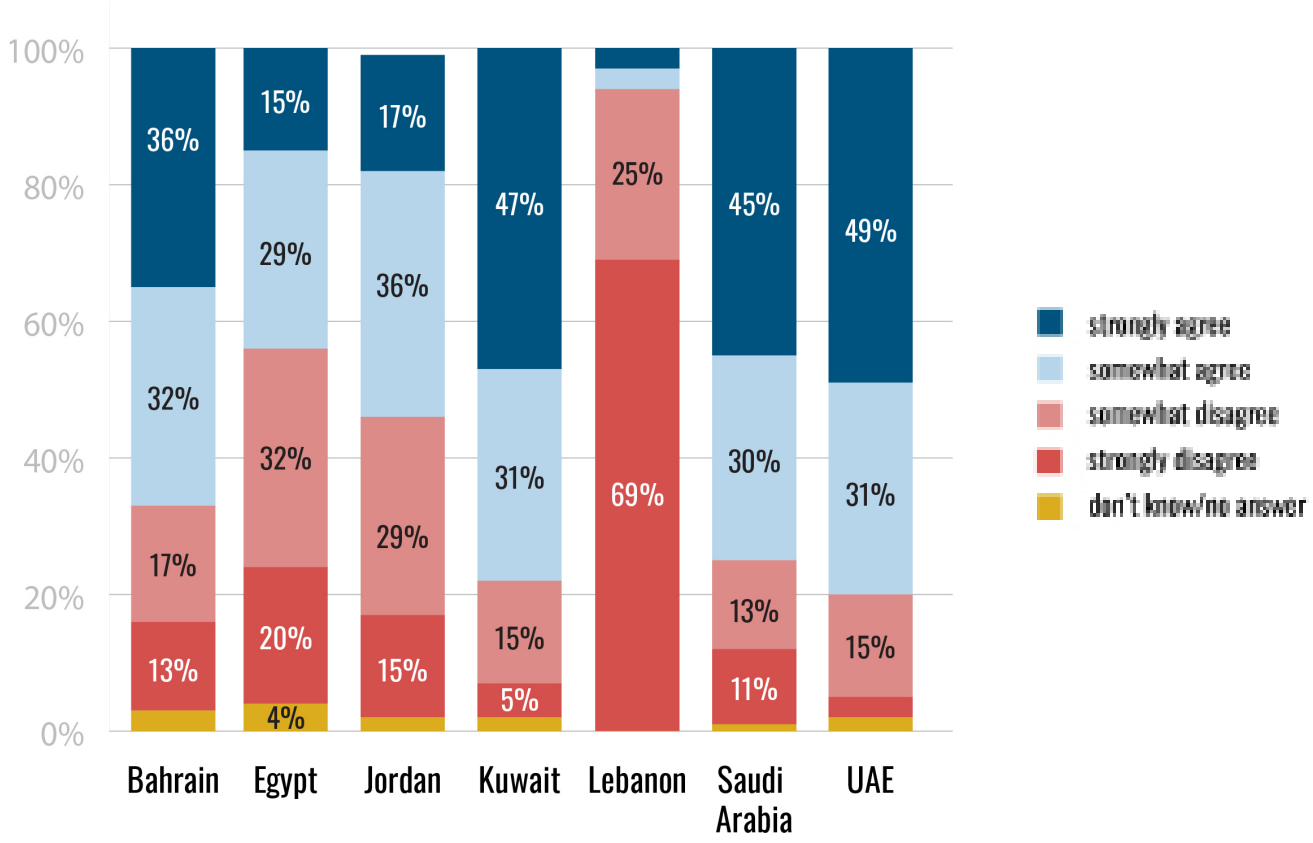
Figure 8.
July 2020:
It's a good thing we aren't having big street demonstrations here now, like they have had in some other Arab countries.



Source: Washington Institute.

Figure 9.

March 2022:
It's a good thing we aren't having big street demonstrations here now, like they have had in some other Arab countries.



Source: Washington Institute.

// Democracy Losing Its Appeal

Souring views on democracy and its efficacy are in fact evident in the latest Arab Barometer data sets, gathered in late 2021 and early 2022, as compared with 2018. Agreement with the idea that "democratic regimes are indecisive and full of problems" has sharply increased, with upticks in Tunisia and Iraq notably predating those countries' protest movements, whereas jumps occurred only afterward in Jordan and Morocco.

It may be that between the 2018 and 2021–22 waves of polling, the protest movements and their ambivalent aftermaths have shaped attitudes in the countries directly affected as well as elsewhere in the Arab world. The apparent contemporaneous failures of Sudanese and Algerian protest movements may have also contributed to a perception of their overall inefficacy. And the resulting deep instability in places like Tunisia, Iraq, and Lebanon echoed earlier disappointments in bringing about governance reform in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt.

These results show that even in countries with parliamentary systems, majorities may perceive the need for an unelected alternative in the interest of stability. This can be true even if the majority simultaneously agrees that democracy remains objectively the best model. Support for democracy in Arab countries must also mean support for good governance within democratic systems, lest growing frustration increase support for alternatives. In countries that do enjoy greater stability, conversely, popular demonstrations hold some appeal—especially in those countries experiencing financial struggles, such as Egypt or Jordan.

// Policy Implications

At the very least, U.S. policymakers should strive to understand and incorporate the data points discussed here into their views of the citizen-government relationship in Arab countries. Polling information helps flag areas of deep frustration that can boil over into significant protest movements, as well as areas where governments have room to enact reforms. Prior to the October 2019 protests, polls indicated high levels of frustration in Lebanon and Iraq, whereas in Saudi Arabia recent reforms, including those regarding interpretations of Islam, appear to have growing support.[34]

In seeking to understand which political models have popular backing, the choice is not, as sometimes presented, a binary one between Islamic fundamentalism and secular liberalism. Rather, a third, increasingly attractive option involves "a more moderate, tolerant, and modern" Islam that helps shape political action. This is precisely the direction in which the leaderships in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, and more haltingly in Egypt and elsewhere, have been clearly attempting to move lately, though this will not address other public concerns. A contrasting alternative would be something like "Islamic electoral democracy," as in Turkey, Pakistan, and arguably Iraq.

To be sure, if democracy is defined as secular, socially liberal, and uniformly religiously tolerant, then it is incompatible with the above models. But if democracy is defined in purely political terms, as majority rule with free and

fair elections in which Islamist and other parties compete for power, then the models that incorporate "moderate, tolerant, and modern" interpretations of Islam are increasingly coalescing within those states where electoral institutions hold weight. The available data leave it unclear whether such a form of public life would or would not satisfy, or at least placate, the majority of the citizenry in each country.

One thing, though, is clear. Trust in legislative bodies—including those considered "more democratic"—is in many cases dangerously low. There are good reasons for this; taking Iraq as an example, free elections could not prevent the losing bloc from seizing control of the government-formation process, nor do they help address the commanding role that deeply entrenched political elites—or "big men"—hold over these ostensibly democratic institutions. These are not issues that the United States can directly address, but it must recognize and calculate for how these factors are shaping, and will continue to shape, the reputation of extant Arab democratic systems.

And as the United States does pursue policies attempting to promote civil liberties and freedoms, it should not assume that every attempt is a self-evident and unambiguously welcome message. There are those, in each country and on each of the governance questions posed, who already think their governments are doing too much. While U.S. efforts need not respond to these voices, it should recognize they exist. Likewise, while the United States should pay close attention to recommendations from human rights and democracy advocates from the region itself, officials should remember these are leaders in human rights issues—popular sentiment may, as is the case in most countries, lag behind.

Likewise, different Arab publics will be open to different efforts and sensitive to or uninterested in others—and these may be distinct from how the United States would prioritize these issues. Once the priorities in each particular country are selected, the means to promote them must be calibrated appropriately. Finally, the United States must also understand that it does not have a monopoly on defining these values—and is now competing with great powers that define them very differently. Policymakers will therefore need to advocate for their model, and be clear as to why it is the American vision of human rights and democracy that is worth adopting.

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