

Political Rights and Civil Liberties in the Middle East: Trends in Freedom House Data Since 2010

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Brief Analysis

The organization's latest report showed persistent backsliding last year and since the Arab Spring, along with dramatic drops in a handful of countries and warnings of further drops next year.

When Freedom House released its annual *Freedom in the World* report (<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2023/marking-50-years>) on March 9, only one country from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region—Iraq—scored higher on political rights and civil liberties than it did a decade ago, and only marginally so. The scores for several other countries remained virtually unchanged over that period, while three registered major declines: Turkey (from 61 to 32), Egypt (41 to 18), and Libya (43 to 10). (Countries can earn up to 60 points for civil liberties and 40 points for political rights.)

As a result, the vast majority of regional countries have consistently been classified as “Not Free.” Only Israel currently has a “Free” designation, and Tunisia lost that label in 2021 after holding it from 2014 to 2020. A closer look at the data offers telling insights about how these issues have evolved (or not evolved) in the region in comparison to both the previous year and the Arab Spring period a decade ago.

Freedom Scores in the Middle East, 2011-23

Country	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Algeria	36	35	35	34	34	35	34	34	34	34	34	34	34
Bahrain	30	29	28	28	25	24	22	22	22	22	22	22	22
Egypt	25	25	24	23	23	23	23	23	22	22	22	22	22
Iran	17	16	16	17	17	17	17	18	18	17	16	14	14
Iraq	25	25	24	23	24	27	27	27	27	27	28	28	28
Israel	81	81	81	81	80	80	80	79	78	76	76	76	76
Jordan	34	35	34	33	34	34	35	35	35	35	34	34	34
Kuwait	44	44	43	39	37	36	36	36	36	36	37	37	37
Lebanon	32	30	29	28	28	28	27	27	27	27	27	27	27
Libya	8	7	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6	6
Morocco	42	43	43	42	42	41	41	39	38	37	37	37	37
Oman	27	27	26	26	26	25	25	23	23	23	23	23	23
Qatar	28	28	28	28	28	27	26	24	24	25	25	25	25
Saudi Arabia	12	10	10	10	10	10	10	7	7	7	7	7	8
Syria	6	6	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Tunisia	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
Turkey	63	63	61	60	60	60	58	52	51	50	50	50	50
United Arab Emirates	27	24	22	21	21	20	20	17	17	17	17	17	18
West Bank/Gaza	21/19	21/19	20/19	20/19	20/19	20/19	20/19	20/19	20/19	20/19	20/19	20/19	20/19
Yemen	29	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23	23
Average Score	32	31	31	30	30	30	29	28	28	27	27	26	26

Source: Freedom House's annual Freedom in the World reports

(/sites/default/files/2023-04/freedom-house-scores-POL3736-table.jpg)

2022 Developments: What Changed in MENA?

Three regional countries saw decreases in their aggregate scores between the 2022 and 2023 Freedom House reports, while five countries saw a 1-point increase and thirteen countries saw no change.

Biggest drop: Tunisia. Its aggregate score decreased by 8 points this year (from 64 to 56), the largest of any MENA country. This includes a 6-point drop in its political rights score due to President Kais Saied’s string of legal and constitutional changes, which undermined opposition candidates seeking to win seats in the December parliamentary election—the country’s first since Saied’s 2021 dismissal of the previous legislature. Tunisia’s civil liberties score decreased by 2 points due to limitations imposed on freedom of expression and the press, along with a decree that weakened judiciary independence.

Iran’s crackdown on civil liberties. Iran’s political rights score did not change this year, while its civil liberties score fell 2 points given the regime’s violent crackdown on the nationwide protest movement that began last September. Freedom House assessed that the regime killed nearly 500 protesters and arrested around 14,000 others between September and December. These and other activities decreased its aggregate score from 16 to 14 (for more on the intricacies of the scoring system with regard to Iran, see the last section of this PolicyWatch).

West Bank political consolidation. The West Bank’s aggregate score decreased from 23 to 22 due to its political rights rating, which dropped after Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas sought to assert control over the judiciary. In October, he issued a presidential decree that created a new High Judicial Council headed by himself; the edict also allowed him to appoint members of the body.

Slight increases in various countries. Despite Lebanon’s ongoing national turmoil (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/washington-should-sanction-officials-obstructing-beirut-port-investigation>), its political rights score actually increased by a point because independent candidates associated with the 2019 protest movement won thirteen seats in last year’s parliamentary election, thereby challenging the country’s entrenched parties. Elsewhere, four countries saw 1-point increases in their civil liberties scores: Saudi Arabia for relaxing laws under the male guardianship system and removing some legal barriers to women entering the workforce; Libya for improving its freedom of expression and belief measures; the United Arab Emirates for improving its associational and organizational rights measures; and Israel for avoiding a repeat of the widespread violence between police and civilians that occurred in 2021 following evictions of Palestinians in East Jerusalem. Notably, however, the Freedom House report warned that the Israeli government formed in December could undermine the country’s judicial independence and core elements of its democracy, potentially lowering its future scores in the process.

Trends Since 2010

Looking further back to Freedom House reports issued last decade, other key MENA trends become apparent.

The Arab Spring “bump” has disappeared. When Arab Spring movements first began unfolding in various countries in late 2010, the average political rights and civil liberties score in the region was 32. This average peaked at 34 in 2012 and then fell consistently, reaching a low of 26 in 2021-2022—a trajectory that reflects the temporary and limited reforms enacted in some MENA countries. Scores steadily decreased after 2012 due to authoritarian crackdowns on protesters and opposition figures.

More specifically, North African countries that went through popular revolutions—Egypt, Libya, and Tunisia—saw substantial but temporary increases in 2011-2012. Tunisia’s aggregate political rights and civil liberties score continued to rise until peaking at 79 in 2015, but then fell 1 point in 2016 and 8 points in 2017 due to postponed elections, the increased political influence of non-elected individuals, and restrictions against opposition figures—problems that presaged the country’s more recent backsliding and score drops under President Saied. Similarly, Egypt and Libya’s scores peaked in 2012 but have since plummeted by 23 and 33 points, respectively. Egypt’s current score is lower than its pre-Arab Spring score, while Libya’s is practically the same. Persistent declines have also been seen in Bahrain (down 18 points since 2010) and Yemen (down 20 points).

Largest freedom declines: Turkey, Yemen, Bahrain. Turkey saw the MENA region’s largest drop in aggregate score (31 points) between 2010 and 2022. Its largest annual decrease (15 points) occurred in 2016 following President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s response to an attempted coup. As Freedom House noted, he imposed a severe media crackdown that year and arrested and purged over 150,000 individuals from the public sector for suspected involvement in the coup. Turkey’s score fell another 6 points in 2017 as the government continued its crackdown, relegating the country to a “Not Free” designation that it has retained ever since.

Yemen and Bahrain suffered the next biggest drops. Yemen’s score fell by 20 points between 2010 and 2022 due to its ongoing civil war, while Bahrain’s fell by 18 due to the government’s harsh crackdown on political protesters and the wider Shia population.

Syria still stands out. In terms of Freedom House scores, none of the above countries has reached the lows experienced by Syria. Since 2010, Damascus has consistently rated among the worst of all governments not just in the MENA region, but globally. Its dismal scores are unsurprising given Bashar al-Assad’s bloody repression of regime opponents, which has included the use of chemical weapons against civilians and numerous other atrocities.

Looking Forward

Tunisia’s political rights and civil liberties scores will almost certainly decrease further in Freedom House’s next report as Saied continues to concentrate his power this year. He has executed a **[highly politicized arrest campaign](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/neglect-human-rights-helped-produce-crisis-tunisia)** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/neglect-human-rights-helped-produce-crisis-tunisia>) targeting critics of the government, including current and former political opposition figures, judges, lawyers, and journalists. Freedom House has also presumably noticed Saied’s inflammatory statements against migration from sub-Saharan Africa, which have triggered violence and indiscriminate arrests against the country’s migrant populations.

As noted previously, Israel’s political rights and civil liberties scores may decrease next year as well. Over the past few months, Prime Minister Netanyahu’s government has sought to legislate a judicial overhaul that is widely seen as concentrating power in the executive branch, leading to massive street protests and the dismissal (later reversed) of Defense Minister Yoav Gallant after he voiced dissent and called to pause the overhaul. Another factor that could affect Israel’s score is National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir’s decision to ban the flying of Palestinian flags in public.

Interestingly, Iran's scores will likely hold steady or fall by only a small amount in next year's report regardless of the regime's performance in 2023. This is because most Freedom House metrics cannot fall below zero according to [the organization's rating system \(https://freedomhouse.org/reports/freedom-world/freedom-world-research-methodology\)](https://freedomhouse.org/reports/freedom-world/freedom-world-research-methodology), and Iran has already reached that figure in [several specific categories \(https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-world/2023\)](https://freedomhouse.org/country/iran/freedom-world/2023) (e.g., people's right to organize political parties). Thus, its overall political rights and civil liberties scores could remain unchanged or drop only slightly next year despite the ongoing crackdown on protests; obviously, this may not mean that its internal situation has remained constant.

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