



الباروميتر العربي  
ARAB BAROMETER

# Democracy in the Middle East & North Africa

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## Executive Summary

After Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed dissolved parliament in July 2021, some observers declared an official end to the democratic experiments that followed the widespread protests across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in 2010-2011. Today, international ranking systems such as Freedom House indicate that there are no countries that are fully "free" among members of the Arab League, implying that there is not a single democracy among these countries.

Yet, when asking those living in MENA, a more complicated picture emerges. Findings from eight countries in Arab Barometer's most recent wave of surveys indicate that ordinary people living in the region have a diverse view of the degree to which they live under a democracy. On an 11-point scale, most place their country slightly above the midpoint suggesting, that their country is slightly closer to a full democracy than a complete dictatorship. However, there is wide variation ranging from a high of 7.7 to a low of 3.3 on this scale, meaning citizens themselves see significant variation in the type of system in which they live.

What accounts for this discrepancy? A closer look at the results reveals that the most important consideration is what is meant by the word democracy. In Arabic, the word is *democratiya*, which is not an indigenous word but rather is borrowed from Greek. In the West, some have reduced democracy to regular and competitive elections following the definition proposed by Joseph Schumpeter. Others have extended this to include basic civil rights and protections for minorities, among other things, but all definitions include a focus on routine free and fair elections.

Yet, the definition of democracy is not universally agreed upon, which is made clear when examining the question from a MENA perspective. In fact, compared with other potential attributes, such as equality under the law, guaranteed civil rights, access to basic needs, safety from physical danger, and absence of corruption, free and fair elections is the least strongly associated with democracy by those living in MENA. This is not to say that elections don't matter for a democracy—the vast majority say that they do—but rather the other attributes are more strongly linked with democracy in their minds. For most, a system with basic protections under the law where they live in safety with sufficient resources to meet their needs without the scourge of corruption would effectively meet their definition of democracy.

Notably, a novel survey experiment by Arab Barometer demonstrates very clearly how citizens in MENA conceptualize democracy. They understand it as nearly the same concept as dignity (*karāma*), which they also link with equality under

the law, guaranteed civil rights, access to basic needs, safety from physical danger, and absence of corruption as well as free and fair elections. Notably, when protesters marched in 2011, most were demanding *karāma* and not democracy, but in effect their definitions of the two are close to identical.

This understanding of democracy explains many of the challenges faced by the post-2011 transitions. By 2019, Tunisia's GDP per capita shrunk by a quarter as compared to 2011.<sup>1</sup> In both Tunisia and Egypt, personal security became an increasing problem while in places like Libya, Syria, and Yemen, civil war followed. Arab Barometer results show that inequality continued to be a major problem while civil rights were not necessarily guaranteed. Even when elections happened, their outcomes were often ineffective governments or many felt they did not represent the will of the people.<sup>2</sup> Ultimately, these outcomes did not align with much of the understanding of the region's citizens about what democracy would entail.

Perhaps as a result, citizens began to lose confidence in the ability of democratic systems to produce better governance. At the time of the 2011 uprisings, very few in the region believed that under democracy the economy would be weak; instability would result; and the system would be indecisive. Yet, a decade later clear majorities held such views in all countries. "Democracy" did not deliver the hoped for results for the region and doubts began to emerge about such a system. Citizens judged "democracy" on its outputs to a greater extent than being satisfied with their ability to have say over the system's inputs through elections.

Yet, this did not mean citizens gave up on democracy. Despite recognition of some potential limitations of a democratic system, clear majorities in all countries still believe that democracy is better than other systems. Moreover, more than half in nearly all countries affirm that democracy is the only viable system of governance they will accept. And, to underscore this point, few say that these problems are only associated with democracy. Instead, there is actually a stronger association between these problems and non-democratic systems. In effect, over the last decade MENA publics appear to have come to a similar conclusion to Churchill: "Democracy is the worst form of government except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time". So, despite frustration over what democracy might lack, it remains the best system in the minds of these publics.

What also emerges is that citizens are not unified in what democracy means when comparing systems that exist around the globe. When asked about the degree to which foreign countries are democratic, the perceived difference in

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<sup>1</sup>Jamal, Amaney and Robbins, Michael. 2022. "Why Democracy Stalled in the Middle East." *Foreign Affairs* 101:2, 22-29.

<sup>2</sup>Robbins, Michael. 2015. "After the Arab Spring: People still want democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 26:4, 80-89.

the level of democracy between Germany, the U.S., and China is relatively small. Citizens are not clearly differentiating societies based on rights, freedoms, and elections, but on other perceptions. Most likely, China scores higher given the perceived strength of their economic model of development, which many MENA countries would hope to follow.

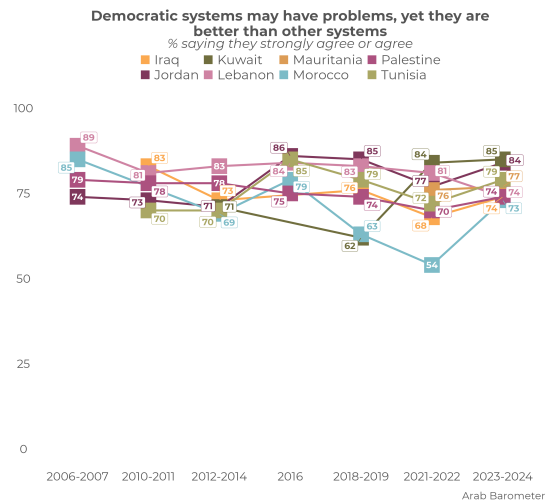
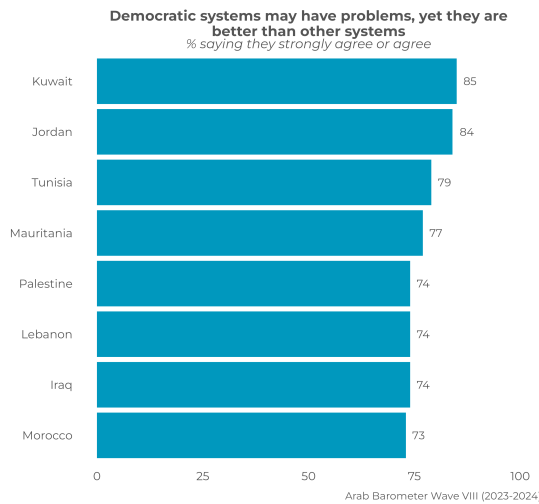
The ultimate outcome for the region is that citizens perceive political stagnation. In most countries surveyed, the plurality of citizens believe that the level of democracy today is about the same as before 2011. The two key exceptions are Tunisia and Morocco, where there is a belief that the country is now more democratic. But, on the whole, MENA's "democratic experiment" did not move the region forward on this measure. Citizens are still searching for a political system that will bring them dignity. The hopes of the early days of the Arab uprisings have given way to the harsh realities that the system remains unchanged without a clear path to achieving these goals.

These are among the main findings of eight nationally representative public opinion surveys conducted across the Middle East and North Africa as part of Arab Barometer's Wave VIII in 2023-2024. The results include more than 15,000 interviews across the region and have a margin of error of  $\pm 3$  points or less in each country. Overall, these results make clear that while citizens across the region have come to realize democracy does not represent a panacea for all their country's problems, they remain most supportive of it compared with other political systems.

## Support for democracy

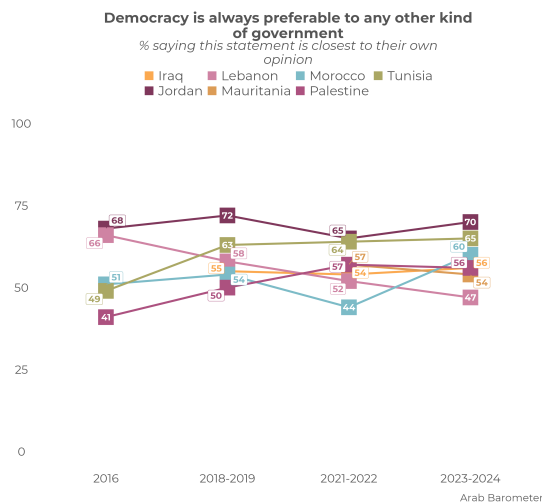
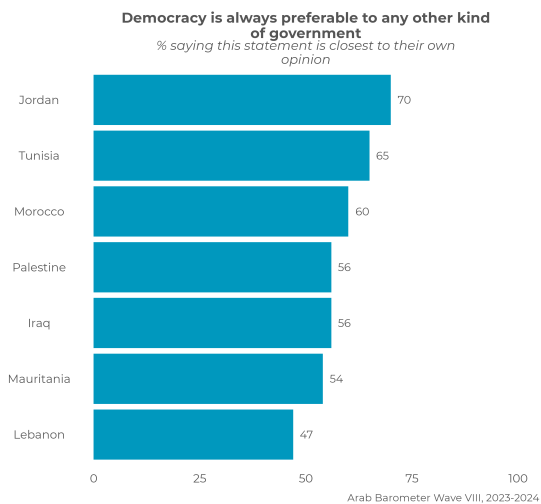
Stated support for democracy (*democratiya*) remains high across MENA. In all countries surveyed, at least 73 percent agree that despite problems that might be associated with democracy it remains the best system of governance. This perception is strongest in Kuwait (85 percent) and Jordan (84 percent) followed by Tunisia (79 percent) and Mauritania (77 percent).

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This high level of support for democracy as a system of governance has been observed in MENA over the last two decades. Majorities have long held this view with at least seven-in-ten stating their preference for democracy in nearly all surveys conducted by Arab Barometer in these countries. However, there have been some changes over time, including in the last two years. During this recent period, support for democracy has largely increased, including by 19 points in Morocco, seven points in Jordan and Tunisia, and six points in Iraq. Only in Lebanon has there been a decrease of seven points.

An alternative means to measure support for democracy is not whether it is the best system, but whether respondents are committed to it as the only viable system. By this measure, support is robust but somewhat lower. In Jordan, 70 percent affirm that democracy is always preferable while 65 percent in Tunisia and 60 percent in Morocco say the same. In the other countries where this question was asked, support is lower with just over half in Iraq and Palestine (56 percent) and Mauritania (54 percent) agreeing while not quite half (47 percent) of Lebanese hold this view.



The percentage of citizens in MENA who have affirmed their full commitment to democracy has varied somewhat over time. In Palestine and Tunisia, there have been double-digit increases in the percentage since 2016 while in Lebanon the percentage has fallen by nearly 20 points over the same period. However, despite the increase over the last two years in the percentage of citizens who say that democracy is the best system, there is not a consistent increase in the percentage that say democracy is the *only* viable system over the same period. The percentage has increased in Morocco (+16 points) and Jordan (+5 points) while it has fallen in Lebanon (-5 points) and remained effectively unchanged in the other countries.

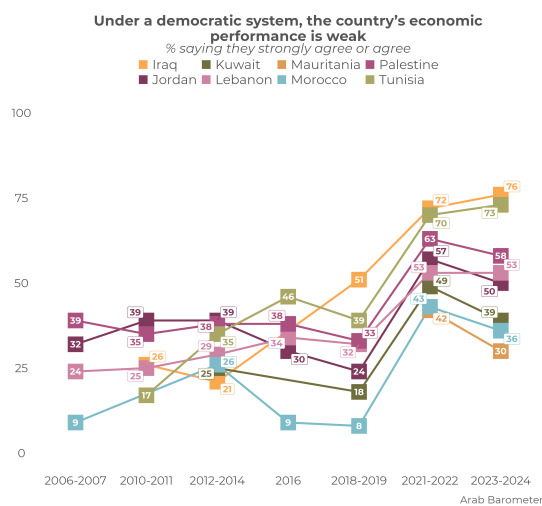
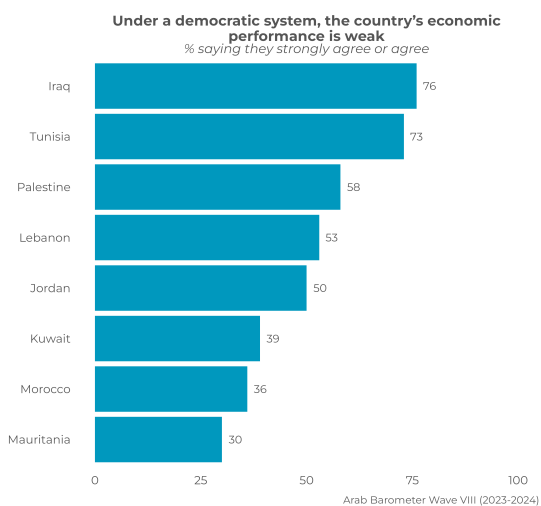
## Concerns about Democracy

In the period between Arab Barometer’s 2018-2019 and 2021-2022 waves, views of democracy in MENA shifted dramatically.<sup>3</sup> Concerns about the perceived weakness of democracy increased substantially across a range of areas. But, the most notable of all was a rise in the belief that economic performance is weak under democracy. In multiple countries, citizens were more than 20 points more likely to hold this opinion in 2021-2022 compared with 2018-2019.

The most notable finding for Arab Barometer’s latest wave is that this upward trend has effectively ended. Today, in the majority of countries surveyed, citizens

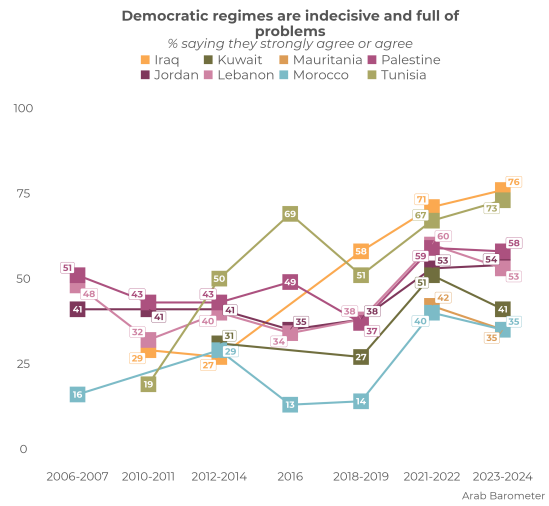
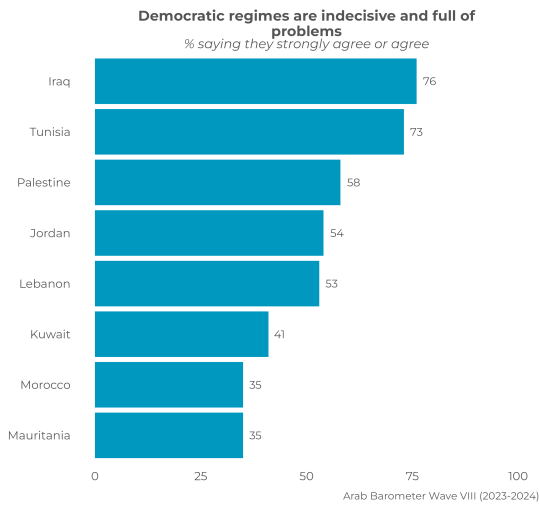
<sup>3</sup>Arab Barometer’s Wave VII report on democracy report can be accessed here:[https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII\\_Governance\\_Report-EN-1.pdf](https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_Governance_Report-EN-1.pdf)

are less likely to make this association than they were two years prior. In Mauritania, this association dropped by 12 points while similar declines are observed in Kuwait (-10 points), Morocco (-7 points), Jordan (-7 points) and Palestine (-5 points). Only in Iraq, Lebanon, and Tunisia is there not a decline. Still, there is widespread concern about this negative association with half or more saying economic performance is weak under democracy in five cases: Iraq (76 percent), Tunisia (73 percent), Palestine (58 percent), Lebanon (53 percent), and Jordan (50 percent).

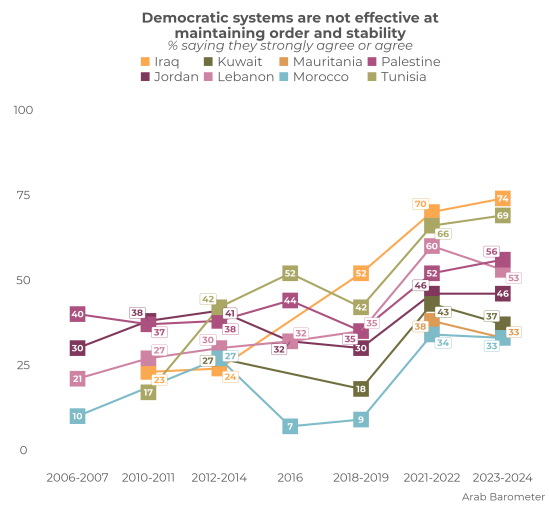
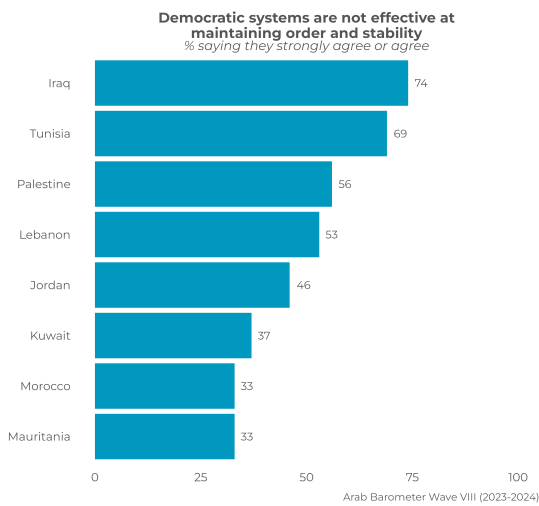


Perceptions that democratic regimes are indecisive follow a similar pattern. In five of the eight cases more than half associate indecision with democracy: Iraq (76 percent), Tunisia (73 percent), Palestine (58 percent), Jordan (54 percent), and Lebanon (53 percent). However, following a massive increase in the percentage holding this view between 2018-2019 and 2021-2022, only in Tunisia (+6 points) and Iraq (+5 points) has there been a meaningful increase over the last two years. In a majority of countries, the percentage has declined including Kuwait (-10 points), Lebanon (-7 points), Mauritania (-7 points), and Morocco (-5 points).

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The same general pattern holds for the perception that democracy is ineffective at maintaining security and order. Between 2018-2019 and 2021-2022, concerns that democracy could not deliver stability increased dramatically. However, since that time concern has not risen further. In most countries, the level has declined over the last two years. For example, this level has fallen by seven points in Lebanon, six points in Kuwait, and five points in Mauritania. Meanwhile, it has remained effectively unchanged in Jordan and Morocco while rising slightly in Iraq and Palestine by four points.

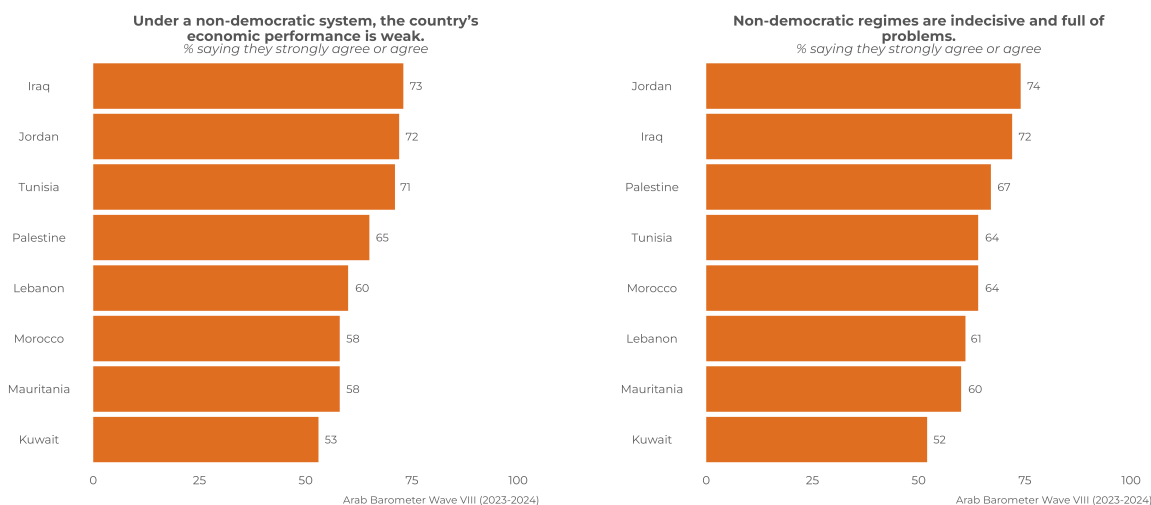




## Concerns about non-democracy

For the first time, Arab Barometer included questions examining the degree to which ordinary citizens in MENA hold negative associations with non-democratic forms of governance. Historically, these non-democracies delivered worse economic outcomes than democracies and also had higher levels of corruption, on average.<sup>4</sup> However, in recent years, the economic rise of China or the strong economic outcomes in some monarchies may have shifted how citizens perceive these outcomes. To assess this perception, Arab Barometer included the format of questions about problems associated with non-democracies and support for such systems as it did for democracy.<sup>5</sup>

Results from Arab Barometer Wave VIII make clear that majorities across the region do not associate non-democracies with strong economic growth. In each of the eight countries surveyed, more than half say that economic performance is weak in non-democracies. This perception is strongest in Iraq (73 percent), Jordan (72 percent), and Tunisia (71 percent), followed by Palestine (65 percent), Lebanon (60 percent), Morocco (58 percent), Mauritania (58 percent), and Kuwait (53 percent). Among all eight countries, only in Iraq and Tunisia is there a stronger perception that democracy is bad for the economy compared with a non-democratic system.

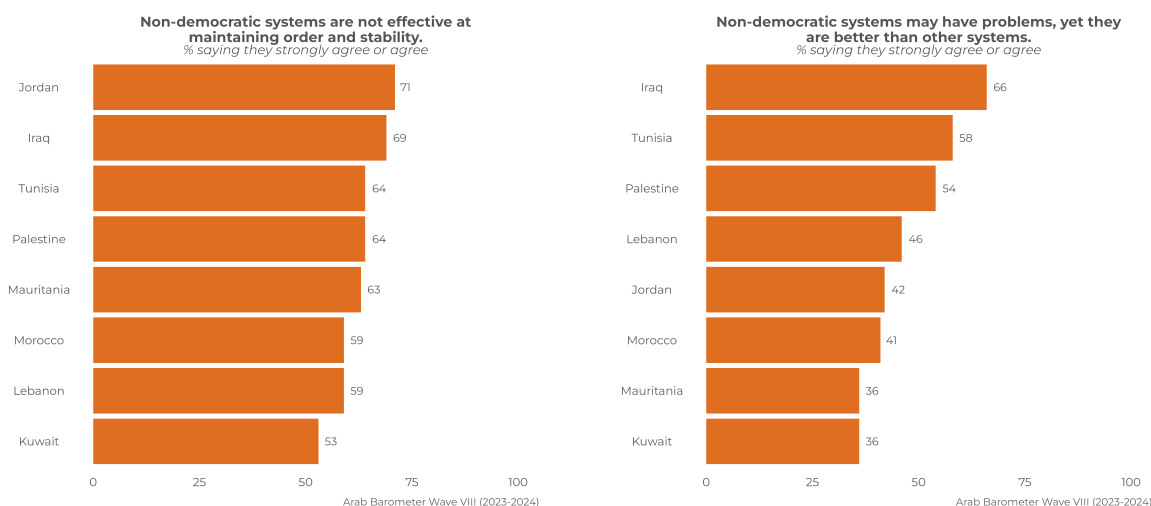


<sup>4</sup>See Przeworski, Adam, Michael E. Alvarez, José Antonio Cheibub, and Fernando Limongi. *Democracy and development: Political institutions and well-being in the world, 1950-1990*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

<sup>5</sup>These questions include the four about whether the economy runs poorly in non-democracies, whether non-democratic regimes are indecisive, whether non-democracies are not effective at maintaining order, and the belief that despite their problems, non-democracies remain the best system of governance. It does not include a parallel question for whether non-democracy is always preferable similar to the one for democracy.

Citizens across MENA have a similar beliefs about the degree to which non-democracies are indecisive and full of problems. In all countries surveyed, at least half agree or strongly agree that this is a feature of non-democracies. The level is highest in Jordan at nearly three-quarters (74 percent) followed by Iraq at 72 percent while six-in-ten or more hold this view in Palestine (67 percent), Tunisia (64 percent), Morocco (64 percent), Lebanon (61 percent) and Mauritania (60 percent). The lowest level is found in Kuwait (52 percent). As before, in all countries except Iraq and Tunisia, citizens are significantly more likely to believe non-democracies are indecisive and full of problems compared with democracies.

There is also a widespread belief that non-democratic systems are ineffective at maintaining order and stability. In all countries surveyed, a majority agrees or strongly agrees that this is a feature of non-democracies ranging from 71 percent in Jordan to 53 percent in Kuwait. As before, in six of the eight countries citizens are more likely to associate instability with non-democratic systems than those that are democratic. Again, the exceptions are Iraq and Tunisia where the public is slightly more likely to say instability is a feature of democracy.



Given the general concerns about non-democratic governance, it is unsurprising that such a system is not widely supported across the MENA region. In five of the eight countries surveyed, fewer than half say that a non-democratic system is better than the alternatives, including just 36 percent in Kuwait and Mauritania, respectively. However, such a system is not entirely rejected either. Four-in-ten or more favor non-democracy in Morocco (41 percent), Jordan (42 percent),

and Lebanon (46 percent). Meanwhile, a majority say that such a system is better than all others in Palestine (54 percent), Tunisia (58 percent), and Iraq (66 percent).

Notably, in every country surveyed, the share of the population saying they prefer non-democratic systems is substantially lower than the percentage saying that democratic systems are always preferable. Gaps of 20 points or more exist in Kuwait (49 points), Jordan (42 points), Mauritania (41 points), Morocco (32 points), Lebanon (28 points), and Palestine (20 points). In Iraq, where the gap is the smallest, there is still an eight point difference. Clearly, citizens across the region are more likely to favor democracy than non-democratic systems. Yet, there remains a substantial percentage who do think that non-democratic forms of government are preferable. This finding suggests that, like many countries in the world, there is a preference for democracy, but not a universal consensus that this is the best form of government among all citizens.

## Defining democracy

Part of the challenge of understanding how citizens across MENA view democracy is how they define what it is and what it is not. In the narrowest of definitions, (representative) democracy is defined as regular free and fair elections that determine a country's leaders based on the will of the people. More expansive definitions also include a focus on guaranteeing basic rights, especially for minority groups, that ensures the protection and equality of all citizens. Although not directly related to the political system, expected outcomes also factor in to some definitions. For most of the post-WWII era, democracies have been wealthier, less corrupt, and less unequal compared with non-democracies. They also tend to provide a wider range of services and benefits to citizens. Politicians, wanting citizens to be happy, needed to develop policies that could benefit the population as a means of trying to win the elections. The result was better outcomes, on average, on a range of social and economic indicators compared with countries that were authoritarian.

David Easton theorized that democracy becomes consolidated when the public moves from specific support for the system to diffuse support. The former is largely equivalent to support for democracy because of the government of the day while the latter is support for democracy regardless of the government of the day. Ultimately, the two types of support are linked. Easton hypothesizes that citizens begin with specific support, meaning the outputs of democracy lead to favorable attitudes which, in time or with proper socialization, turns into diffuse support that can endure a period of poor outcomes such as a recession or a poor quality leader without jeopardizing broader support for the system itself. Yet, if conditions remain poor enough over a lengthy period, diffuse support may evaporate potentially leading to loss of support for democracy.

The vast majority of those living in MENA have somewhat limited experience with a democratic system. However, many have experienced some aspects. Tunisia's post-2011 experiment was perhaps the most extensive in the region's history, but other countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Egypt have experienced competitive elections. Citizens across the region can also look to examples of democracy in other parts of the world as examples of what constitutes this form of government. Yet, given the varieties of democracy and the differing outcomes that have resulted, those living in MENA may define this system in a number of ways.

Arab Barometer designed a survey experiment to better understand how citizens in MENA interpret the concept of democracy (*dimuqrāṭiyya*). First, Arab Barometer asked about six concepts that citizens might associate with democracy: equality under the law; absence of corruption; provision of basic necessities for all; free and fair elections; safety from physical danger; and guaranteed civil rights. For each of the six concepts, respondents were asked if it was "very essential", "somewhat essential", "not very essential", or "not essential at all" to their personal understanding for what democracy means. For nearly all concepts, the primary variation was between those who said the concept was "very essential" or one of the other three alternatives, so the analysis that follows divides the results into these categories.

The most striking feature of these findings is that citizens tend to be less likely to associate democracy with free and fair elections compared with the five other attributes. In seven of the eight countries surveyed, citizens are least likely to say elections are very essential to democracy of all of these attributes. The lone exception is Mauritania where two-thirds say elections are very essential, which is slightly more than the 63 percent who say the same about an absence of corruption. By comparison, in Iraq, citizens are at least five points less likely to say elections are very essential than the other five attributes. In Tunisia the gap is at least four points for each item while citizens are 16 points less likely to point to elections than the provision of basic necessities for all. In Morocco, elections are seen as very essential by only 55 percent of citizens, which is effectively tied with feeling safe from physical danger, but 16 points less than equality under the law and 13 points less than having civil rights guaranteed.

Notably, this does not mean that elections are unimportant to citizens in MENA. Clear majorities say that they are a very essential part of democracy across the region. Moreover, elections are not the only aspect of democracy. Most scholarly definitions include things like equality under the law and the guarantee of basic rights or all citizens. In Kuwait (94 percent), Morocco (71 percent), and Mauritania (71 percent), equality under the law is the most common item among these six for being a very essential attribute of democracy. Moreover, in each of these three countries, basic rights being guaranteed for all is the second most com-

mon attribute cited.<sup>6</sup> Only in Jordan is equality under the law tied with guaranteed basic rights (81 percent) as the most common attributes. Even though elections are less emphasized, citizens across these four countries clearly associate democracy with political equality.

In the remaining four countries, the most commonly cited attribute is that basic necessities are available for all, including 91 percent in Tunisia, 86 percent in Iraq, 85 percent in Lebanon, and 78 percent in Palestine. Other aspects are also seen as important, but economic security remains the top priority in these cases. Notably, over the past two decades, these are also the countries where elections have been more meaningful—in each the government in power has changed as a result of an election during this period. Yet, despite this experience, citizens in each country prioritize outcomes from democracy over the process of inputs for this system. In each, basic necessities are at least ten points more likely to be seen as a very essential aspect of democracy than free and fair elections.

## Democracy vs. Dignity

Findings from Arab Barometer have made clear that citizens across MENA largely associate all six attributes with democracy: equality under the law; absence of corruption; provision of basic necessities for all; free and fair elections; safety from physical danger; and guaranteed civil rights. Yet, there are important differences across countries in the degree to which each of these attributes is strongly linked with their understanding of democracy.

To lend greater insight into conceptions of democracy in MENA, Arab Barometer included an experiment. While half of respondents received the battery of questions described above, the other half received a similar set of questions but asking about the key attributes of dignity (*karāma*). The attributes were identical for both definitions, which allows a clear comparison of the extent to which dignity and democracy represent similar or distinct concepts in the minds of MENA publics.

The results for dignity strongly resemble those for democracy. In three countries, the attribute most strongly associated with dignity is equality under the law: Kuwait (95 percent), Jordan (84 percent), and Mauritania (77 percent). In all three countries, this was also the most commonly cited attribute of democracy. Meanwhile, in five countries, the provision of basic needs for all is the attribute most strongly linked with dignity: Tunisia (92 percent), Iraq (85 percent), Palestine (85 percent), Lebanon (84 percent), and Morocco (71 percent). In four

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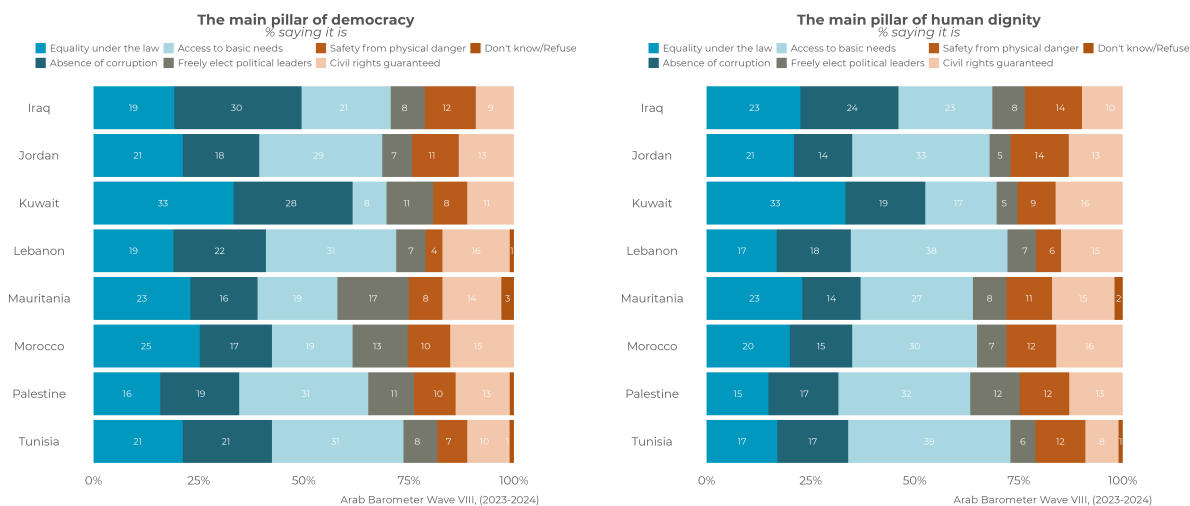
<sup>6</sup>These items are not necessarily different from other attributes at a level that is statistically significant. But, in statistical terms, they are among the top two attributes in all cases.

of these five cases, this was also the attribute most associated with democracy. The lone exception is Morocco, where citizens most strongly associate equality under the law with democracy. However, the results show that in seven of the eight countries, the same attribute was most strongly linked with both concepts.

Meanwhile, free and fair elections is the attribute that the fewest link with dignity in seven of the eight countries surveyed. The lone exception is Mauritania, which is also the only exception to this trend for the attributes of democracy. In the other seven countries surveyed, free and fair elections was significantly less linked with dignity compared with the other five attributes listed.

Another means to compare how MENA citizens understand democracy and dignity is to examine what their primary definition of each among these six attributes is. These results suggest a similar outcome—perceptions of democracy and dignity are highly similar by this measure as well. For example, the percentage that say that equality under the law is the main pillar of democracy and human dignity differs by five percentage points or less in all countries surveyed, which means that for most the difference falls within the margin of error. For civil rights being guaranteed for all, at most the difference is five points in any country surveyed, again showing a high degree of similarity. For free and fair elections, the difference is nine points in Mauritania with the concept being more associated with democracy. However, in the remaining countries the difference is six points or less.

For access to basic needs for all, there is greater variation. For example, access to basic needs is more associated with human dignity than democracy in Morocco (11 points). In Kuwait the gap is nine points followed by eight points in Tunisia and Mauritania, and seven points in Lebanon. In Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine, the difference is four points or less. However, the differences are less for absence of corruption and there is virtually no difference for safety from physical danger in any country surveyed.

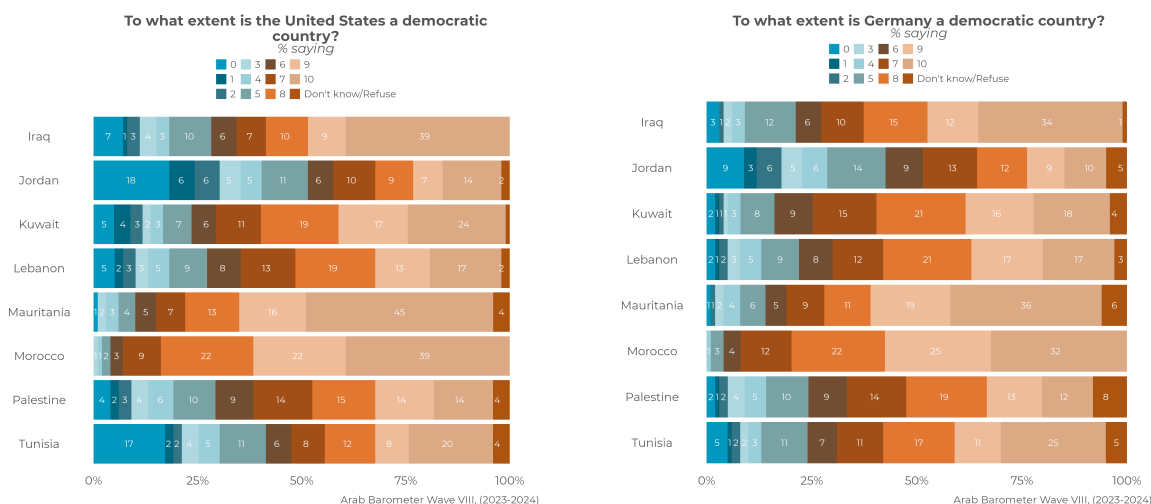


The similarity of results strongly suggests that citizens in the region see a high degree of similarity between democracy and dignity. Rather than defining democracy as a political system that centers on elections, it is a system that would bring them personal dignity. Dignity includes economic security, personal security, basic rights, and political equality. It is also linked with freely choosing political leaders, but to a lesser extent. But, the main takeaway is when MENA citizens say they support democracy, their demands are for much more than elections. They want a government that cares for their needs and it appears most would consider any system that provided for political equality, economic needs, and personal security as one that was democratic.

## Democracy in practice

An additional means to understand how citizens in MENA define democracy comes from comparing attitudes about democracy in countries around the world. When asked about two Western countries, the United States and Germany, that are widely considered to be examples of democratic governance, most in MENA countries agree with this assessment. On a scale of 0 to 10, with 0 being completely non-democratic and 10 being a full democracy, most in MENA rate the U.S. as being democratic. For example, in Mauritania, 45 percent rate the U.S. as being a complete democracy while 39 percent in Morocco and Iraq do the same. At the same time, those in Jordan and Palestine are more skeptical with just 14 percent saying the U.S. is fully democratic. Overall, however, in no country is the average score below five while in four countries it exceeds seven. The mean average is lowest in Jordan (5.1) and Tunisia (5.8) while it is highest in Morocco (8.7) and Mauritania (8.4).

Fewer across MENA say that Germany is a full democracy compared with the U.S. Those in Mauritania (36 percent), Iraq (34 percent), and Morocco (32 percent) are the most likely to rate Germany as a 10 on this scale while those in Jordan (10 percent) and Palestine (12 percent) are the least likely to do so. However, on average, those in MENA give a higher score to Germany than the U.S. In all but two countries, the mean rating exceeds seven, including 8.6 in Morocco and 8.2 in Mauritania. Only in Jordan (5.7) does the mean for Germany fall below six.

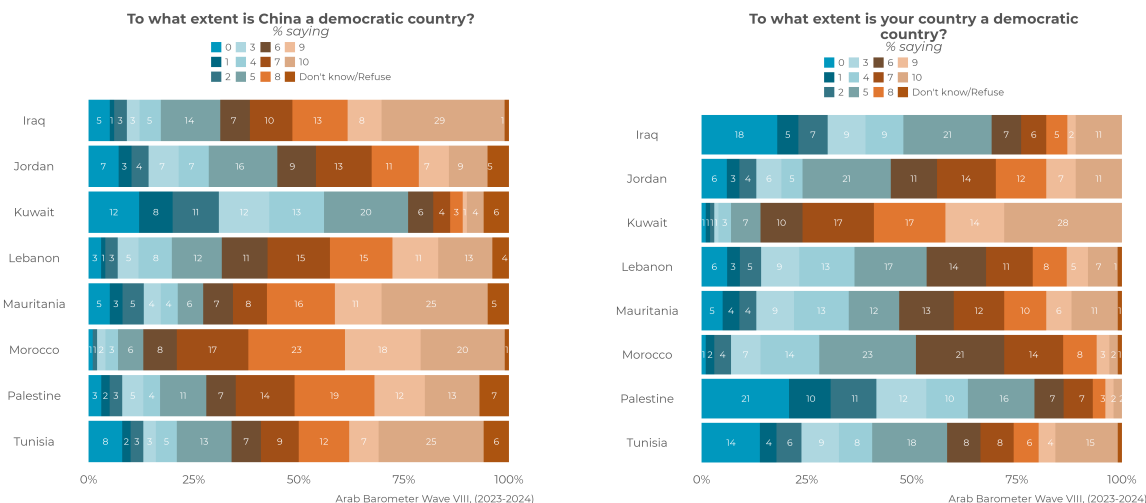


A third question asks about the degree to which China is democratic. Compared with the U.S. or Germany, fewer citizens in MENA consider China to be a full democracy. At most, 29 percent in Iraq consider China to be a complete democracy while a quarter in Tunisia and Mauritania say the same. Taking the mean average, only in Morocco (7.7) and Iraq (7.0) is China’s rating at least a seven. In half of the countries, the average score is between six and seven, while it is slightly lower in Jordan (5.7) and substantially lower in Kuwait (3.8). By comparison, in no country is the average score for China greater than for Germany, but in Jordan and Tunisia, China’s score is significantly higher than for the U.S.

Finally, Arab Barometer asked respondents about the level of democracy in their own country. Using the same scale, many fewer citizens described their own country as a full democracy compared with the three foreign countries. The lone exception is Kuwait, where 28 percent say the country is a full democracy. The next highest country is Tunisia with 15 percent saying it is a full democracy while in all other countries the level does not exceed 11 percent. By mean average, again Kuwait stands out with a rating of 7.7. At the other extreme, Palestine’s average score is the lowest at 3.3 followed by Iraq at 4.4. In all other

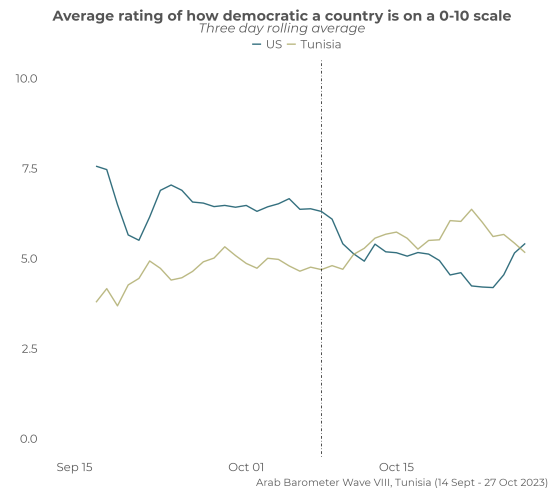


countries, the rating ranges between five and six, suggesting their countries are at the approximate midpoint on this 11-point scale.



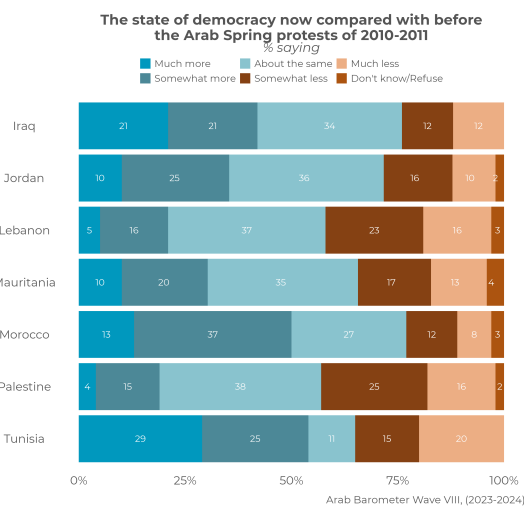
These ratings of foreign countries highlight the metrics by which those in MENA understand democracy. China, which does not hold national elections for leadership, is widely seen as less democratic than Germany and the U.S., but the margin is not dramatic. Compared with the U.S. on the 11-point scale, China’s average rating is within one point of the U.S. in six of the eight countries surveyed. Although it doesn’t have elections, China has greatly increased the economic well-being of its population over the last half century, which is likely the key factor by which citizens in the region are judging its level of democracy.

Additionally, a closer examination of Tunisia lends additional insight into how citizens in MENA view democracy. By chance, about half of the interviews in Tunisia were completed before October 7, 2023, which is the day that Hamas attacked Israel, and the remainder took place over the following weeks when Israel responded with a military campaign against Gaza. Arab Barometer plotted the three rolling daily averages for the mean democratic rating by Tunisians of their own country and the U.S. In the days before October 7, the U.S. was consistently seen as more democratic than Tunisia. For most days, the U.S. average was nearly 7 while the rating for Tunisia was closer to 5. However, shortly after October 7, the daily trend reverses with Tunisia being seen as more democratic than the U.S. due to a decline in perception of the degree to which the U.S. was democratic combined with an increase in the rating for Tunisia.



No major event occurred in either the U.S. or Tunisia that could realistically have produced this change in perception. Instead, it appears to result from the differing approaches taken by the governments in the U.S. and Tunisia toward the situation in Gaza. At the time, U.S. President Joe Biden declared "ironclad" support for Israel at this time of pain and suffering for their country, including military support for their campaign in Gaza. At the same time, Tunisian President Kaïs Saïed pledged support for the people of Gaza and condemned the Israeli military campaign. Tunisians, who strongly support the Palestinian cause and Gaza over Israel, appear to have shifted their assessments of democracy in both countries in response to these actions. In their minds, the U.S. was not standing up for the rights of innocent civilians in Gaza unlike their own government. Given that their understanding of democracy closely aligns with human dignity, they viewed the U.S. response as undemocratic while the Tunisian response as more democratic. This shift in views underscores the importance of actions beyond elections in defining democracy in MENA.

Another point of comparison is a comparison to the state of democracy within one's own country at a prior time. To gauge this view, Arab Barometer included a question asking respondents about the state of democracy in their country today compared with the period before the Arab Spring protests of 2010-2011. The findings shed light on the extent to which respondents see democracy as progressing or regressing in their country.



The results present a mixed assessment of democratic change in MENA. In five out of seven countries where this question was asked, the plurality say that the level is about the same, including in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, and Palestine. Tunisia is the only where a majority (54 percent) say that their country is now more democratic while in Morocco almost exactly half hold this perception (49 percent).<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, Iraqis (42 percent) and Jordanians (35 percent) are the next most likely to say their country is more democratic than it was pre-2011. At the same time, Lebanese (21 percent) and Palestinians (19 percent) are the least likely to hold this view.

On the other hand, in no country does a majority say their country is less democratic than before 2011. Palestinians are the most likely to say democracy has regressed (41 percent) while 39 percent of Lebanese say the same. By comparison, just 20 percent of Moroccans and 27 percent of Jordanians<sup>8</sup> say their country is less democratic now than before the Arab uprisings.

Perhaps the most interesting case is Tunisia, which is the country that had the longest and deepest democratic experiment after 2011 as measured by Freedom House. Tunisians are the least likely to say that their country's level of democracy is "about the same" among all countries at 15 percent. Although a majority (54 percent) say the country is more democratic, a substantial percentage (35 percent) say the country is less democratic than it was under former President Ben Ali. Although most still recognize the changes that have

<sup>7</sup>When "much more" and "somewhat more" are combined into a single category, the combined total comes to 49 percent.

<sup>8</sup>When "much less" and "somewhat less" are combined into a single category, the combined total comes to 27 percent.

taken place in the country, there remains division over whether these changes have effectively led to more democracy.

## Conclusion

Citizens across MENA support democracy but do not define it primarily as freely choosing their leaders for elections. Instead, democracy is less about inputs than outputs. To many ordinary citizens, elected parliaments appear to be inefficient means of making meaningful improvements in their lives. In cases like post-revolution Egypt and Tunisia, significant debates were over the role of religion in the state instead of the issues that would improve the lives of ordinary citizens. In places like Iraq and Jordan, parliaments focused more on distributing rents than making meaningful changes. Meaningful change did not happen to better people's lives following the Arab uprisings.

The result yields a complicated picture for the future of democracy in the region. No longer do citizens believe this system represents a panacea that can lead to universally better outcomes. Instead, they approach it with caution, recognizing that economic conditions, personal security, and the ability to make key reforms are not necessarily guaranteed under democracy. Although democracy can improve some aspects of their lives, a sudden shift to such a system will not bring improvements overnight.

As a result, MENA publics still prefer democracy over other systems but remain fully cognizant of the limitations of this system of governance. In reality, this shift might actually be beneficial to the cause of democracy if political openings were to take place again. If citizens update their expectations about what a system of free and fair elections does and does not deliver, it might make such a system more likely to endure. Citizens will not expect a complete transformation as a result of living in a democracy.

At the same time, for those pushing for political liberalization, these results have clear lessons. Changing the political system alone is insufficient to win the hearts and minds of the public. Providing them with say over the inputs of the system without a clear focus on the outcomes will not lead to political reforms that endure. As Easton implies, the outputs must improve the lives of citizens to win support for the overall system. Any such opening would require improvements to economic conditions above while ensuring that personal security and basic civil rights are guaranteed. But, mostly, citizens simply want dignity, which means economic and personal security combined with political rights. If this full package were to be realized along with a system that allowed citizens to freely choose their leaders, there would be a much greater likelihood of the success of democratic transitions in the MENA region.



## About Arab Barometer

The Arab Barometer is a nonpartisan research network that provides insights into the social, political, and economic attitudes and values of ordinary citizens across the Arab world.

We have been conducting rigorous and nationally representative public opinion surveys on probability samples of the adult populations across the Arab world since 2006. The margin of error is  $\pm 2$  percent.

The Arab Barometer is the largest repository of publicly available data on the views of men and women in the MENA region. Our findings give a voice to the needs and concerns of Arab publics.

Through 2024, the Arab Barometer has conducted nearly 100 national surveys over eight waves including more than 135,000 interviews in 16 Arab countries.



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