

# Food Insecurity and its Discontents in the Middle East and North Africa

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## Executive Summary

Food insecurity plagues majorities of citizens in six out of 10 countries surveyed as part of Arab Barometer’s seventh wave (2021-2022). Majorities from 53 percent in Libya to 68 percent in Egypt report that they ran out of food before they had money to buy more. And in nine out of 10 countries, more than half of all citizens express concern about running out of food before being able to get more. These findings reiterate a [long-standing and often observed quagmire](#) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA): the high proportion of food insecure citizens in middle income countries with otherwise medium or high levels of human development is staggering.

Beyond affirming this quagmire, Arab Barometer’s newest data show that looking at region through the lens of food insecurity and its web of discontents emphasizes seven key challenges facing MENA: “Democracy fatigue” is highest among the food insecure, though they still prefer democracy to its alternatives. Gender gaps in reports of food insecurity [reiterate the consequences](#) of extreme gender imbalances in labor force participation. Urban-rural cleavages in food insecurity are a reminder that food scarcity can be [higher in rural areas](#) on account of decreased access to credit, reliance on import substitution strategies, shrinking agricultural lands, and climate change. Despite the documented effects of the latter on food availability, food insecure citizens are less likely to want government intervention to address climate challenges.

Differences between food secure and insecure citizens on evaluations of the economy are more muted than expected, perhaps because broadly defined economic challenges loom heavily on all. Still, those suffering from food insecurity express a higher desire to emigrate. And finally, food insecurity has devastating effects on present and future outlooks, with food insecure citizens—particularly youth—less likely to say both that their lives are better than their parents’ and their children’s lives will be better than their own.

Poor economic conditions broadly defined are not a new phenomenon in MENA. The difficulties posed by intra-regional variation and prevalence of decade(s)-old conflicts notwithstanding, attempts to give regional snapshots of economic health in the region point to a similar conclusion: progress toward alleviating poverty and hunger and addressing inequality is at best stalled. The 2022 global [poverty update from the World Bank](#) reports that the MENA region is the only one where the extreme poverty rate has increased between 2010 and 2020, in fact [doubling](#) between 2015 and 2018. [A World Inequality Lab study](#)<sup>1</sup> (summarized [here](#)) analyzing data between 1990 and 2016 named the Middle East

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<sup>1</sup>This study excluded North African countries and categorized included countries into five blocks: 1. Turkey, 2. Iran, 3. Egypt, 4. Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine and Yemen, and 5. Saudi Arabia, Oman, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait.

as the most unequal one in the world with respect to income: the bottom 50 percent of income earners controlled just 10 percent of total regional income.

But among the most [alarming trends](#) was captured in the [2019 UN Food and Agriculture Organization \(FAO\) report](#) on MENA. The report notes that despite making progress in reducing hunger in the early 2000s, the “portion of the population suffering hunger today is the same as it was 10 years ago: 13.2 percent.” And while the proportion has remained the same, the absolute number of undernourished individuals in MENA rose from 44 million to 55 million between 2004-2006 and 2016-2018, owing in great part to ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Syria, and Yemen.

Yet it is not simply that conflicts in these countries have overshadowed progress elsewhere. Except in Algeria, Djibouti, Morocco, and Tunisia, where absolute numbers of undernourished individuals have decreased, absolute numbers in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates have either stayed the same or increased, even if the same upward trend is not reflected proportionally due to rapidly growing populations.<sup>2</sup> [FAO's 2021 report](#) notes that this trend continues, as hunger has increased by upwards of 90 percent between 2000 and 2020, with current hunger levels reaching heights similar to what they were at the peak of the 2011 uprisings. And even with [one in three individuals](#) in the Arab world being food insecure, the effects of the COVID19 pandemic have not yet been fully realized, let alone the effects of the war in Ukraine.

Food insecurity symbolizes the pinnacle of disenfranchisement. In the development context, it is given primacy in hierarchically arranged goals. In 2015, when the eight UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) expired and the 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) took effect, one of the [most notable changes](#) was that MDG 1 –“Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger”—was split into SDG 1, “no poverty,” and SDG 2, “zero hunger.” Separating the two was done in recognition of the fact that [solving one would not automatically solve the other](#). Instead, they are interconnected with each other and with several of the remaining 15 SDGs. In the same vein, Arab Barometer findings reaffirm that lacking a need as basic as food reverberates in citizens’ governance preferences and perceptions such that addressing food insecurity is a necessary—though perhaps not individually sufficient—entry point for improving multiple development outcomes throughout the MENA region.

Data for this report were collected as part of Arab Barometer’s seventh wave of nationally representative face-to-face surveys. Conducted between 2021 and 2022, surveys were fielded in ten countries: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya,

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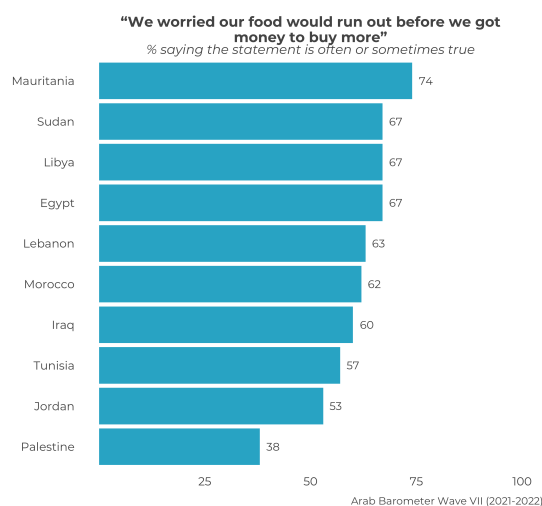
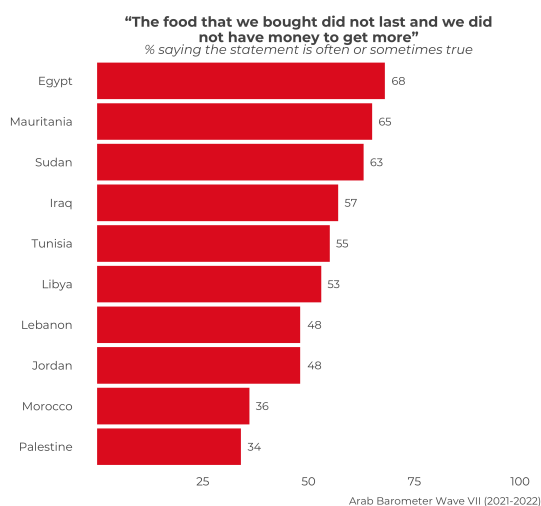
<sup>2</sup>See page 5 of the FAO report for prevalence of undernourishment in absolute numbers and page 7 for percentages.

Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, and Tunisia.<sup>3</sup> In each country, between 1,800 and 2,400 citizens were interviewed to measure their opinions and attitudes about economic, political, and social issues affecting their country and the MENA region at large. Response rates ranged between 17 and 79 percent, and the margin of error of these reported results is  $\pm 2$  percentage points when comparing across countries.

## Defying expectations... still

Publics across the Middle East and North Africa are reporting food insecurity at an alarming rate. In six out of 10 countries, majorities from 53 percent in Libya to 68 percent in Egypt report that they ran out of food before they had money to buy more. Nearly half of all citizens (48 percent) in each Lebanon and Jordan report the same.

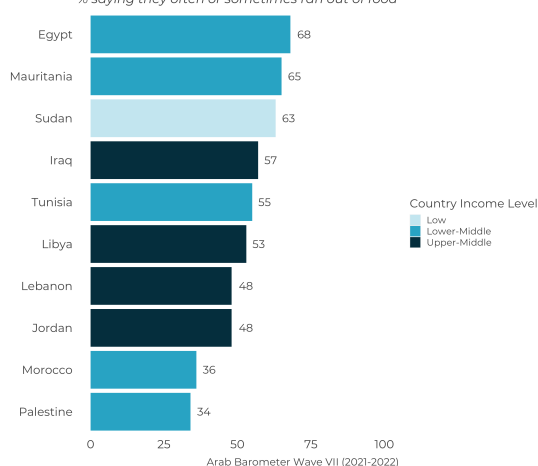
Additionally, in nine out of 10 countries, more than half of all citizens express concern about running out of food before being able to get more, suggesting that the threat of food insecurity looms precariously. This is particularly true in Libya (67 percent), Lebanon (63 percent), and Morocco (62 percent), where citizens are less likely than those in other countries to have run out of food but are nonetheless preoccupied by the prospect of it.



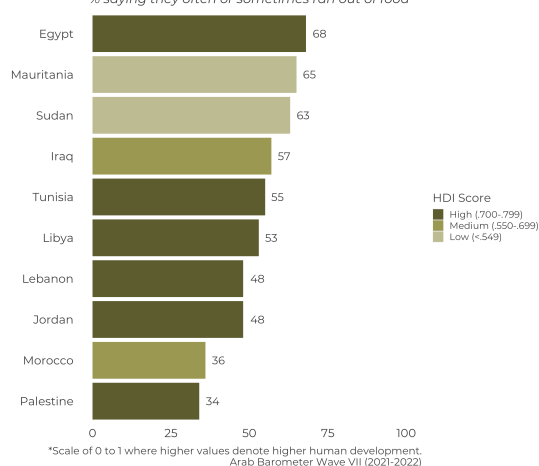
<sup>3</sup>Given the global reverberations of the war in Ukraine specifically on food availability, survey timing is important to note. Surveys in Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Mauritania, Palestine, and Tunisia were all completed before the Russian invasion began on 22 February 2022. Surveys in Jordan, Libya, and Sudan started as early as a month before this date, but data collection in these three countries was ongoing until April 2022. The survey in Morocco was completed between March and April 2022.

Perhaps what is most alarming about Arab Barometer findings on citizens' self-reported food insecurity is that several countries defy expectations. Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Libya are [classified as upper-middle income countries](#) (UMICs), a categorization which does not preclude food insecurity from existing but would otherwise suggest it is not as prevalent as Arab Barometer findings suggest. (Notably, Iraq, Lebanon, and Libya, alongside Palestine and Sudan, are designated fragile and conflict-affected situations.) Likewise, the [2020 Human Development Index](#), a [composite measure](#) of a country's health, knowledge, and standard of living, assigns Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Palestine, and Tunisia a score higher than .700 (on a scale of 0 to 1), denoting a “high” level of development on the index's four-category scale (very high, high, medium, and low).

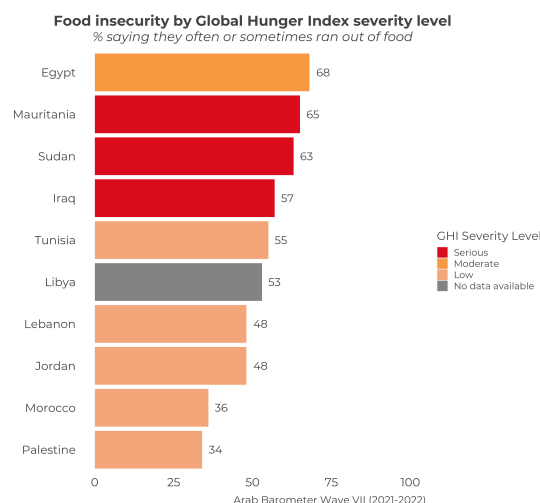
**Food insecurity by World Bank country income level classification**  
% saying they often or sometimes ran out of food



**Food insecurity by Human Development Index score\***  
% saying they often or sometimes ran out of food



These counterintuitive findings also pervade indices that are more specific to the issue of food insecurity. On its five-level scale (low, moderate, serious, alarming, and extremely alarming) measuring hunger, the [Global Hunger Index](#) lists Tunisia, Lebanon, and Jordan as “low,” despite nearly half or more of citizens reporting they often or sometimes ran out of food before they had money to buy more. Out of the 113 countries on the [Economist's Global Food Security Index](#) (GFSI), Egypt, Jordan, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia are marked as “good” performers on issues of food affordability, availability, quality and safety, and natural resources and resilience.



Notably, running out of food often or sometimes may not meet the FAO’s malnutrition-centered [definition of “hunger,”](#) which is the dominant one in use. But while FAO’s metric [continues to engender criticism](#), it nonetheless recognizes the difference between hunger and food insecurity, the latter being a state in which individuals lack regular access to food on account of unavailability or lack of resources to obtain it. Arab Barometer data suggests that this is a reality for just about half or more citizens in eight surveyed countries, and this irregularity of access to food gives reason for pause.

Food insecurity is related to a myriad of factors including but not limited to livelihoods, agricultural production, food import policies, supply chain (mis)management, political corruption, migration, climate change and natural disasters, and fiscal, monetary and trade policies. But while often evoking a heated “chicken and egg” debate, food insecurity is most often inextricably linked to armed conflict. On the one hand, [armed conflict drives hunger](#), and on the other, [hunger drives armed conflict](#).

Since the “Arab Spring” uprisings began in 2010, not a single country surveyed in Arab Barometer’s seventh wave has been completely free from one or more violent conflicts, proxy wars or occupation, coups d’état, fraudulent elections, and forced internal displacement or refugee crises. Even while enjoying support among part of their populations, non-electoral changes of government in [Egypt](#) (2013), [Sudan](#) (2021), and [Tunisia](#) (2021) have wreaked havoc on stability and their citizens’ abilities to feed themselves because of decreased humanitarian aid and increased cost of living. Armed conflict in Iraq and Libya, both oil economies, has been nearly incessant since the U.S.’s invasion of the former in 2003 and uprisings against Gaddafi regime in 2011. The violence

has contributed to record breaking levels of moderate or severe food insecurity, reaching **37 percent in Libya**, and undernourishment, reaching **38 percent in Iraq**. Israel's now 14-year blockade on Gaza has left **64 percent of Palestinians** there food insecure. And Lebanon's ongoing financial crisis that began in 2019 contributed to a **20-point rise** from 41 percent in 2020 to 61 percent in 2021 in the number of citizens encountering difficulties accessing food and basic needs.

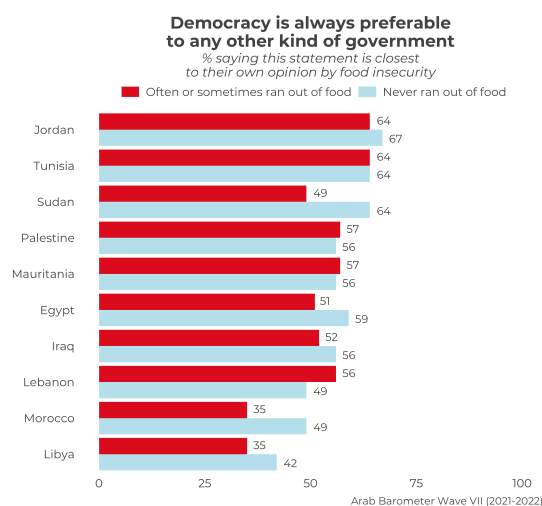
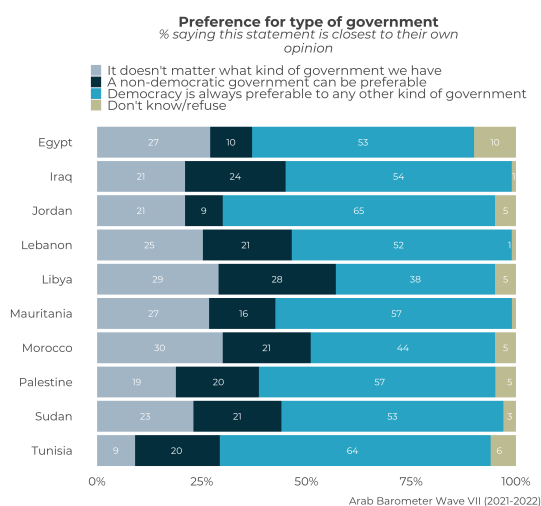
Perhaps the most surprising findings on food insecurity come from Jordan, which, while affected by the Syrian refugee crisis and has had **episodic protests**, has remained one of the most stable of surveyed countries. Nonetheless, at 48 percent, just under half of all Jordanian citizens report often or sometimes running out of food before being able to get more, while 53 percent expressed concern about the prospect of experiencing insecurity. Jordan's economy—and particularly its subsidies—has long been the backbone of the monarchy's governing strategy, though **numerous scholars** have offered **explanations** of how and why “ripe” conditions never swelled to full blow uprisings. But the COVID19 pandemic strained the country's **strategic reserve-based approach** to addressing food insecurity, and Arab Barometer findings suggest that underlying **structural problems**, such as reliance on food imports and a climate inhospitable to agriculture are outpacing the subsidy-based approach to addressing food insecurity.

When put in context with country-specific developments, Arab Barometer findings from Jordan reiterate a more region-wide and decades-old quagmire: despite the prolonged conflicts or episodic crises that have left approximately half or more citizens in eight out of 10 countries struggling to put food on the table, states nonetheless are meeting benchmarks that deem them middle-income countries with high human development.

As acknowledged by **those responsible** for measuring poverty rates, an individual's shift from living on US\$1.90 to US\$2.00 a day might take that individual out of the analytical category of “extreme poverty” but does not commensurately mean that he/she is no longer impoverished. Likewise, the floor does not have to fall out and a problem does not need to reach crisis level until it is one that nonetheless requires addressing, not only because it is a problem in and of itself, but also because of its many reverberations. Arab Barometer's seventh wave findings serve as a reminder that macrostructural assessments can obscure the everyday, lived realities of citizens. Instead, these findings offer an opportunity to redirect attention to intra-country differences in who is more likely to experience food insecurity and how it affects citizens' views of the most pressing problems facing their countries.

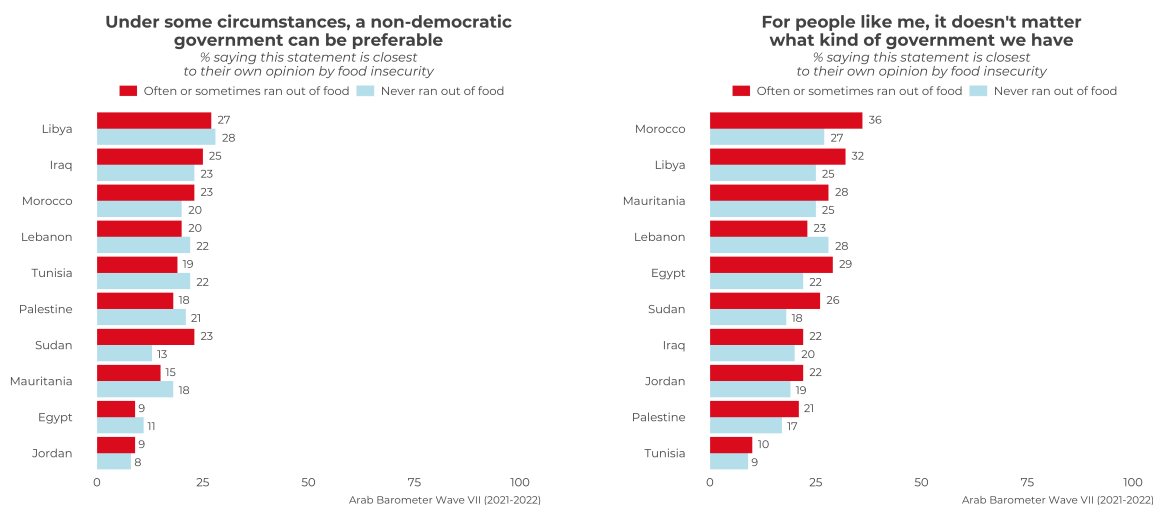
## Implications for government preferences

A long standing finding in Arab Barometer data is that publics in MENA **judge democracy based on its outputs**, and findings from the seventh wave continue this trend. Though support for democracy has been in decline over the past decade, in seven out of 10 surveyed countries, majorities still believe that democracy is preferable to its alternatives. The allegiance to democracy in theory, however, is significantly lower among food insecure citizens in Sudan, where there is a 15-point gap between those who did and did not run out of food, Morocco (14-point gap), Egypt (8-point gap), Libya (7-point gap), and Iraq (4-point gap). Still, only small minorities say that non-democratic government can be preferable, and among those who hold this opinion, there are no significant differences between food insecure and secure citizens.



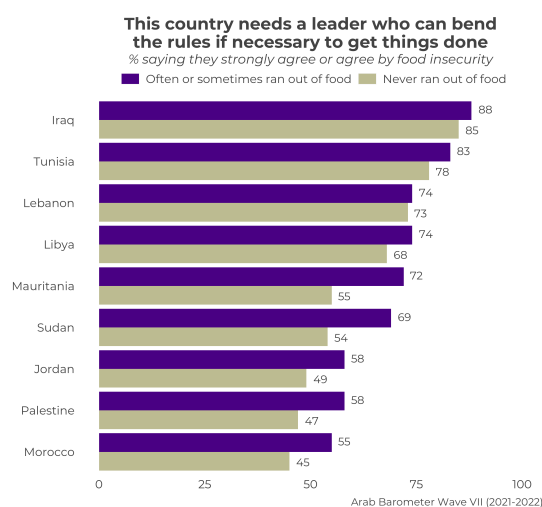
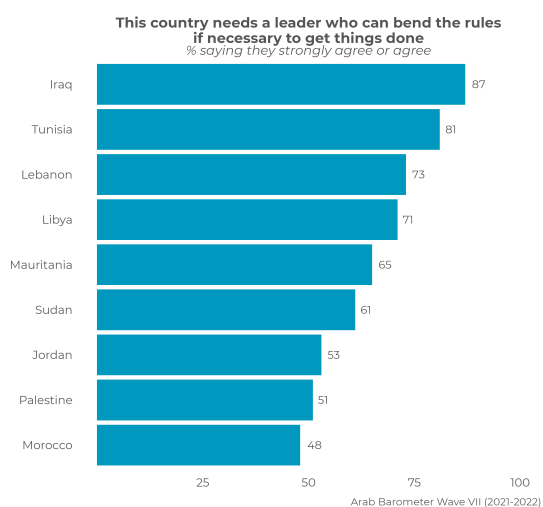
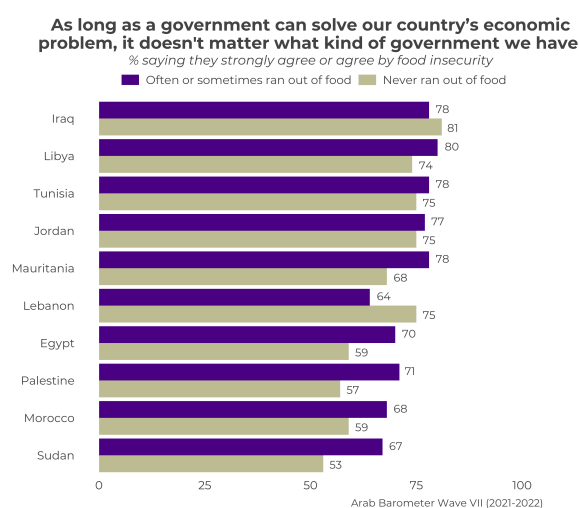
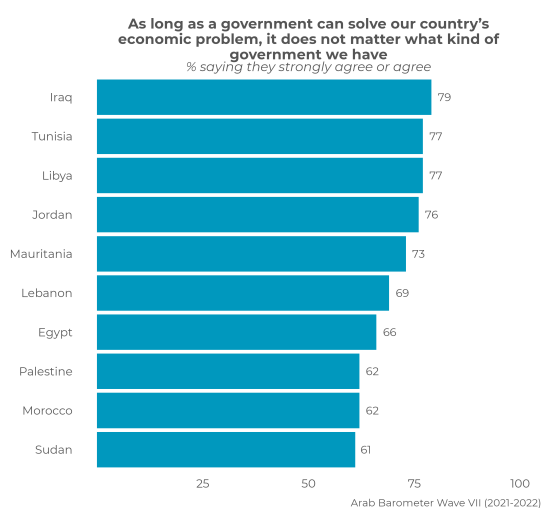
## Arab Barometer – Wave VII

### Food Insecurity Report



At the same time, overwhelming majorities of citizens across surveyed countries suggest that the kind of government they have—be it democratic or otherwise—does not matter so long as that government can solve the country’s economic problems. This finding is again amplified among those who often or sometimes ran out of food. In Morocco and Palestine, food insecure individuals are 14-points more likely than their counterparts to privilege outcomes over processes, and there are similarly large gaps in Egypt (+11 points), Mauritania (+10 points), and Libya (+6 points).

As a corollary, majorities in eight countries, from 53 percent in Jordan to a staggering 87 percent in Iraq, and nearly half of all citizens in Morocco and Palestine agree that their country “needs a leader who can bend the rules to get things done.” Interestingly, support for this strongman-style leadership is lower at the national level—that is, in the countries on the lower half of the comparative list—differences between food secure and insecure citizens are particularly pronounced. Mauritians, Sudanese, Jordanians, and Palestinians, and Moroccans who often or sometimes ran out of food are at least 9 points likelier than their counterparts to support the statement.



That Iraq and Tunisia have the highest shares of citizens agreeing with these two statements often used to measure the favorability of populism is notable given that they, alongside Lebanon, are the only countries in the region that (arguably) have had successive, meaningful elections, the procedural benchmark for “democracy.” In considering food insecurity, it is not difficult to see why: [Tunisia's three-year average](#) of those experiencing moderate to severe food insecurity rose from 18.2 percent in 2014-2016, the period just after the country's democratic constitution was ratified, to 25.1 percent in 2018-2020. Similarly, in the three-year average of [undernourishment in Iraq](#) between 2000-2002, the final years of Saddam Hussein's 24-year presidency, the share of undernourished individuals stood at 22.4 percent; by 2014, three years after the

country's first elections, that figure rose to 37.8 percent. What complicates these increases, of course, is that democratic elections took place against the background of continued armed conflict in Iraq and instability in Tunisia, making it difficult to differentiate the economic outcomes of democracy from the economic outcomes of the democratic transition and the instability—armed or otherwise—that comes with it.

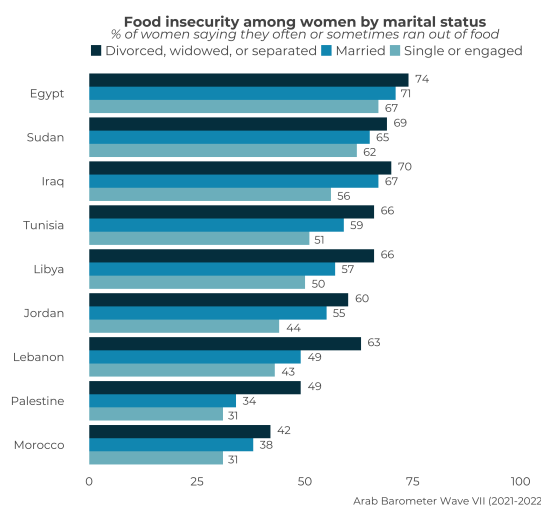
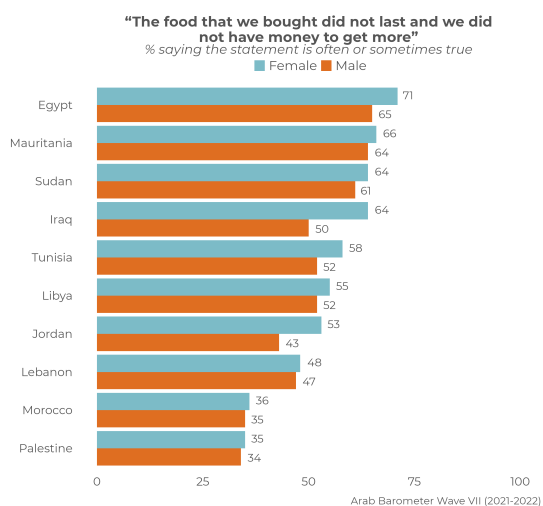
Considering views of democracy and populism independently of one another might mistakenly lead to sweeping rejection or affirmation of the “bread or freedom paradigm,” which pits long-term potential gains of a more inclusive and participatory political system against short-term requirements to satisfy basic needs. Instead, looking at views of democracy and populism in tandem reiterates the false dichotomy of the paradigm: publics in surveyed countries affirm that systems which give them voice in decision making processes are preferable and they want systems that can provide for their basic needs.

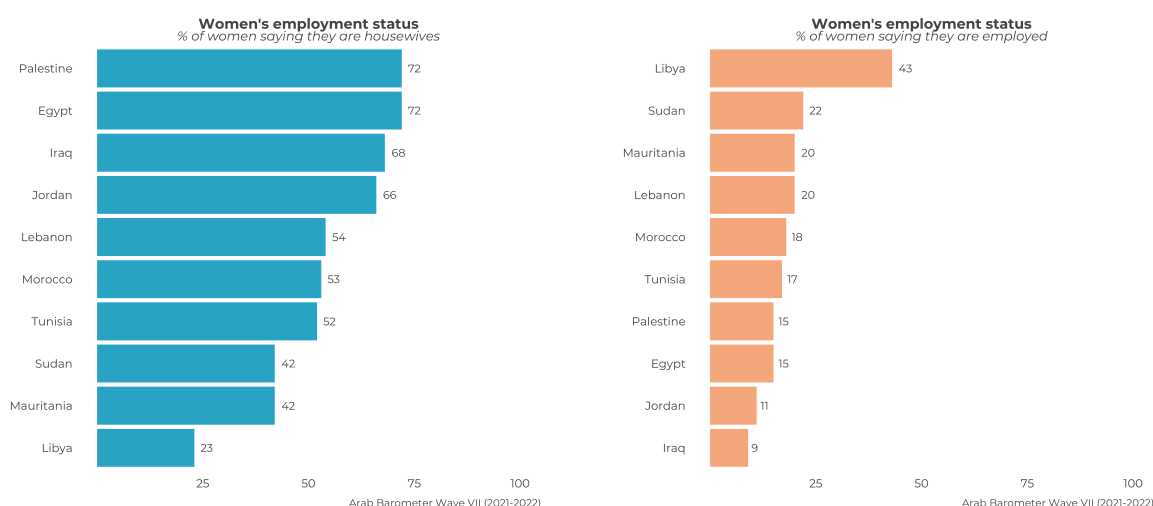
“Democracy fatigue” is higher among those who report often or sometimes running out of food, but food insecure citizens are generally not an exception to this pattern. While in several countries their preference for democracy over its alternatives may be weaker than those who are food secure, and their privileging outcomes over processes and institutions stronger than their counterparts, their preferences temper overall national preferences but do not outright reverse majority trends in most cases; that is, with few exceptions, where food secure citizens are in the majority in preferencing democracy, so too are food insecure citizens, though at lower rates. Conversely, while food secure citizens are in the majority in placing a premium on solving a country's economic problems, so too are food insecure citizens in most countries, though at higher rates. The notable exception to this pattern appears in preferences for having a leader who can “bend the rules.” In the three countries—Jordan, Palestine, and Morocco—where national level agreement with this statement is comparatively lowest and hovers just around the 50 percent mark, food insecure citizens are more solidly in the majority than food secure citizens in expressing their preference for this style of leader.

What these results emphasize is that citizens in surveyed MENA countries judge government based on governance, just as citizens do elsewhere. Differences between food insecure and secure citizens on these measures reiterate that this is particularly true among the most disadvantaged. Addressing food insecurity at a time when citizens have a sobering grasp that [democracy is no silver bullet solution](#) to their problems might strengthen commitment to it.

## Gender divides in food insecurity

Gender divides in food insecurity are not as prevalent or as stark as those pervading government preferences, but where these divides do exist, they highlight consequences of imbalances in labor force participation. Women are more likely than men to report food insecurity. Double-digit differences between women and men stand out in Iraq (64 percent of women vs. 50 percent of men) and Jordan (53 percent of women vs. 43 percent of men), followed by smaller, 6-point differences in both Egypt and Tunisia. Furthermore, among women, those who are food insecure and self-identify as divorced, widowed or separated are significantly likelier than those who are single or engaged to report often or sometimes running out of food in all countries and likelier than married women to report the same in Tunisia, Libya, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine.





These differences in reports of food insecurity between women and men may owe to participation in the monetized labor market. Majorities of women in Palestine, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia self-identify as housewives and are thus outside the paid workforce, instead shouldering most responsibility for nonmonetized labor. Meanwhile, in all countries save Libya, fewer than one in four women self-identify as employed.

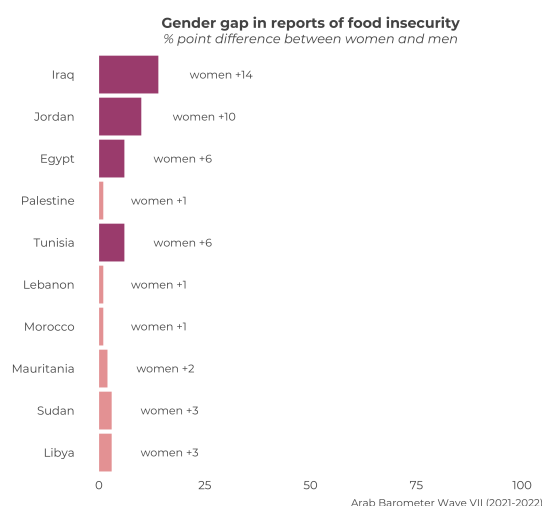
The shares of women who are housewives are among the highest and the shares of women who are employed are among the lowest in three of the four countries where the gender gap in reports of food insecurity is largest: In Iraq, where there is a 14-point gender gap in food insecurity, 68 percent of women are housewives while only 9 percent are employed. In Jordan, the 10-point gap between men and women reporting they ran out of food aligns with 66 percent of women who are housewives versus only 11 percent who are employed. Egypt, where 72 of women percent housewives and 15 percent are employed, follows a similar pattern, and while just over half of Tunisian women are housewives, just 17 percent are employed.

As such, what is potentially driving the gender divide in food insecurity is not simply the high shares of housewives nor simply the low shares of employed women, as these two phenomena are prevalent in numerous countries, even those where there is no gender gap in food insecurity. Rather, it may be the ratio of women who are employed to those who are housewives that is driving the gender gap.

### Ratio of self-employed women to housewives



Arab Barometer Wave VII (2021-2022)

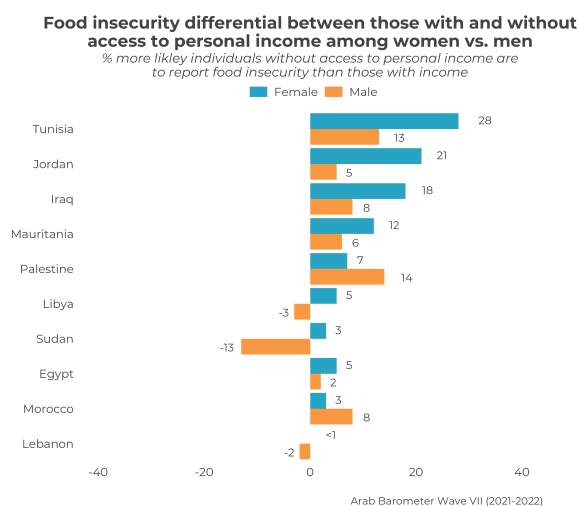
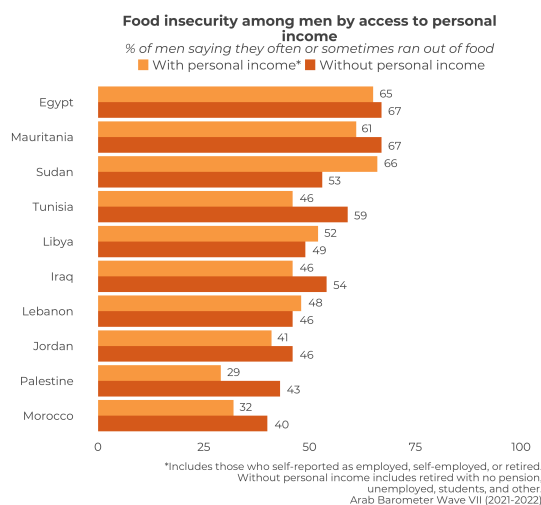
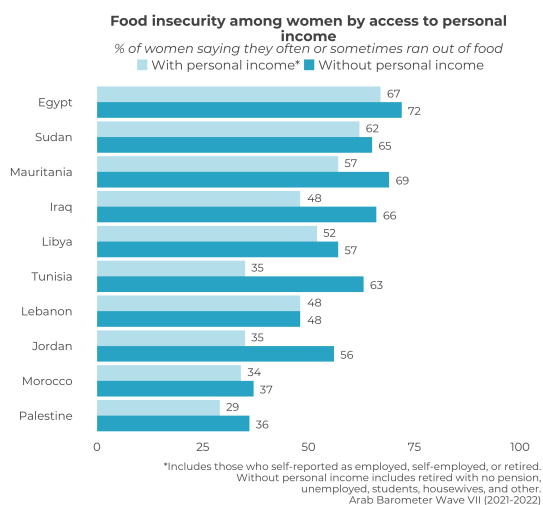


Arab Barometer Wave VII (2021-2022)

To be sure, in most countries the shares of those reporting food insecurity are much higher among both men and women who do not have a source of personal income (proxied by those who self-identified as employed, self-employed, or retired and receiving pensions) in comparison to those who do have a source of personal income. What is notable, however, is the size of those differences among men and among women: again, in Tunisia, Jordan, and Iraq, women without access to income are respectively 28, 21, and 18 percentage points more likely to have often or sometimes run out of food than women with access to income. In contrast, among men, gaps are significantly smaller: there is a 13-point gap between men do not and do have income in Tunisia, a 5-point gap in Jordan, and an 8-point gap in Iraq.

## Arab Barometer – Wave VII

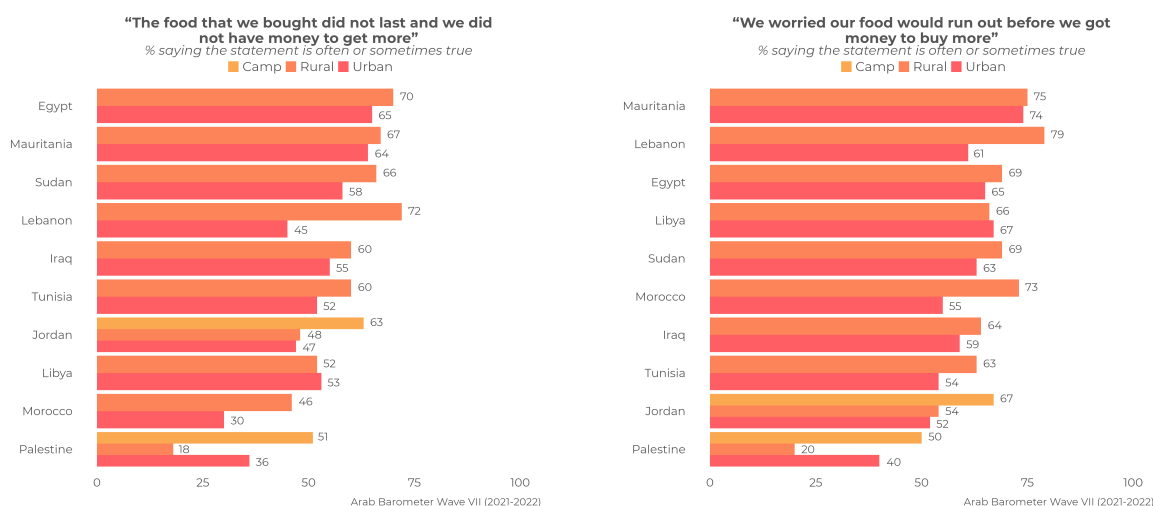
### Food Insecurity Report



For the past 20 years, female labor force participation in MENA has **been the lowest of any other region**, which has had devastating consequences both for **overall economic health of the region** and **also for women themselves**. Arab Barometer findings on food insecurity particularly in Iraq, Jordan, and Tunisia among others contribute more evidence for the need for continued efforts to address the **multiple barriers** that preclude women from entering the monetized labor force.

## Urban-rural divides

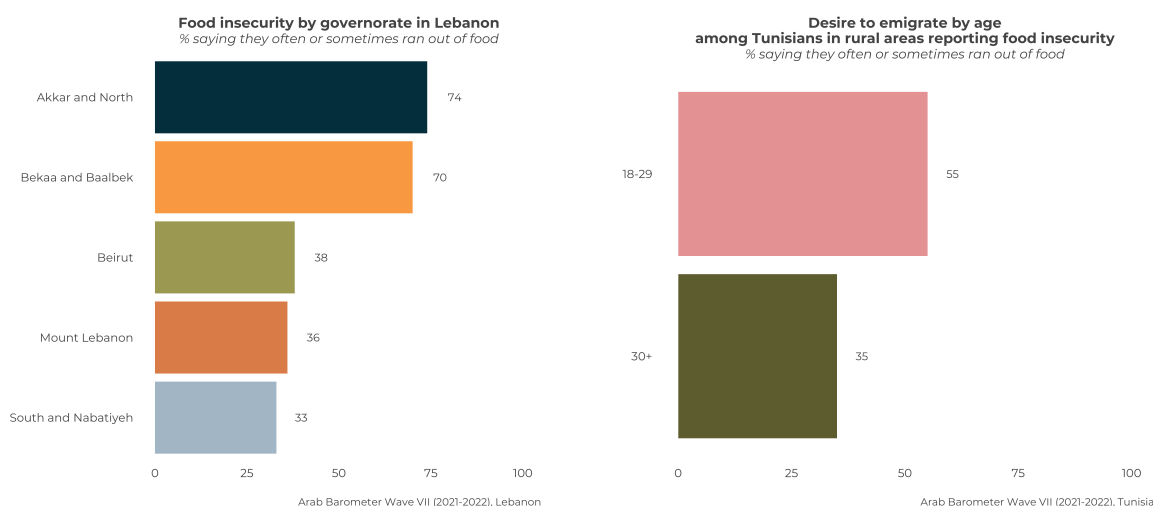
Like gender divides, urban-rural cleavages in Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia are underpinned by systemic, structural factors. In these three countries, both statements about food running out or the fear that it would are more common among citizens in rural areas than their urban counterparts. On the one hand, rural areas tend to be underserved, have lower levels of education, and higher levels of those who suggest they cannot meet their basic needs, of which food is only one. On the other hand, rural areas are often home to countries' agricultural belts, and in the three countries where urban-rural divides are significant, agriculture faces numerous challenges.



The urban-rural divide is most stark in Lebanon, where 72 percent of citizens in **disproportionally impoverished** rural areas compared to 45 percent in urban areas report the food they bought was insufficient. Lebanon's financial and banking crisis decimated the country's ability to produce food by cutting off farmers from credit needed to import seeds, fertilizers, and irrigation systems, resulting in an **estimated 40 percent increase** in the cost of growing vegetables between 2019 and 2020. Arab Barometer findings reflect these structural challenges, as citizens in Lebanon's agricultural belts in Akkar and the North (74 percent) the Beqaa Valley and Baalbek (70 percent) are more likely to report running out of food than citizens in other areas of the country.

In Tunisia, where **agriculture was posited** as a key cause of the 2011 revolution, “distress migration”—a last resort option to escape conflict, poverty, or food insecurity, among other insurmountable challenges—has sent rural youth,

particularly those who work in agriculture and livestock, [in search of greener pastures](#). This trend is reflected in Arab Barometer findings: among Tunisians in rural areas who report often or sometimes running out of food before they could get more, 55 percent of youth ages 18 to 29 versus only 35 percent of those over 30 want to emigrate. While the administration of Tunisian President Kais Saied has pointed toward food speculation as the [core of the country's food shortage problem](#), the agricultural sector is in the crosshairs of highly regulated imports (controlled through the central Cereals Office), less land dedicated to agricultural production, climate change, and corruption.



Morocco's attempts at addressing food insecurity have been more deliberate, but unequally beneficial to all citizens as it [shares with Tunisia](#) a high reliance on importing food. [Deemed a "hidden" problem](#) on account of stigma, food insecurity is reported by fewer Moroccans (36 percent) than citizens in other survey countries. But the notable 16-point gap in food insecurity reported by those in rural areas (46 percent) versus urban ones (30 percent) [corroborates the noted shortcomings](#) of Morocco's attempts to address food insecurity.

While the [2008 Green Morocco Plan](#) increased food production, the plan disproportionately benefitted larger agricultural enterprises, rather than smaller, rural ones, and relied on heavily on agricultural imports. The country's [Generation Green 2020-2030 Plan](#), attempted to rectify these inequalities by focusing on human development in rural areas. Arab Barometer findings suggest the urban-rural gap nonetheless endures. Furthermore, the import substitution strategy's vulnerability to external price increases will likely continue to impact citizens' abilities to feed themselves and their families as the war in Ukraine continues to affect the supply chain.

## Climate change and food insecurity

Even before the war in Ukraine sent food prices soaring and disrupted global supply chains and before the COVID19 pandemic plunged the region into food insecurity, environmental threats had already begun to affect the food supply. Pollution, desertification, rising temperatures, drought, and increasing salinity of irrigation sources variously have affected all surveyed countries particularly by impacting the agricultural sector.

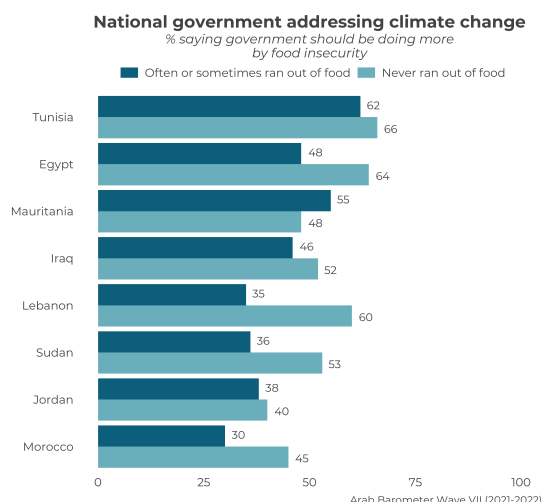
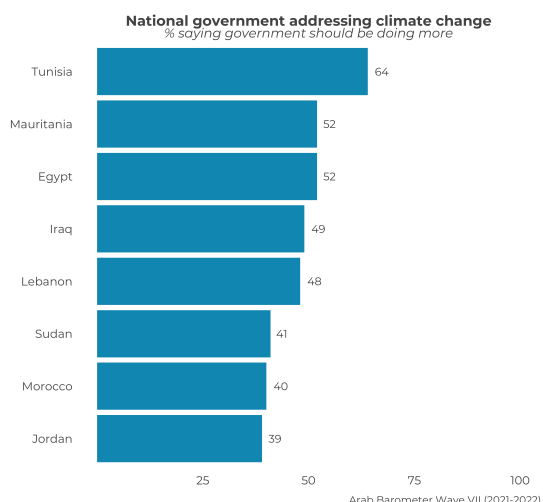
Iraq is prime example of the domino effect climate change has had particularly on the water supply and in turn on agriculture. Iraq's water scarcity problems sent citizens to the streets in 2019, as pollution and water shortages forced residents particularly in the Basrah governorate to purchase water. Two years later in 2021, Iranian attempts to conserve water by building dams has left Iraq's Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG) suffering water shortages, again leading to protests. Neither crisis has been addressed, are likely to worsen. In June 2022, Lake Sawa in the south, which provides both water for drinking and irrigation, dried up, leaving farmers to pursue other sources of livelihoods. These effects on the country's food supply have been made worse by the war in Ukraine, and while not addressing the climate or water crises directly, Iraq's parliament passed an emergency food security bill in June 2022 allocating US\$17 billion to address ensuing food shortages.

But Iraq is not the only place where water scarcity poses a significant problem in MENA. In Jordan, depleting underground water supply has led to a 30 percent increase in the cost of water over the past decade. In Mauritania (65 percent) and Sudan (63 percent), where shares of citizens reporting food insecurity are second and third highest, drought conditions have led to crop failures and increases in food prices.

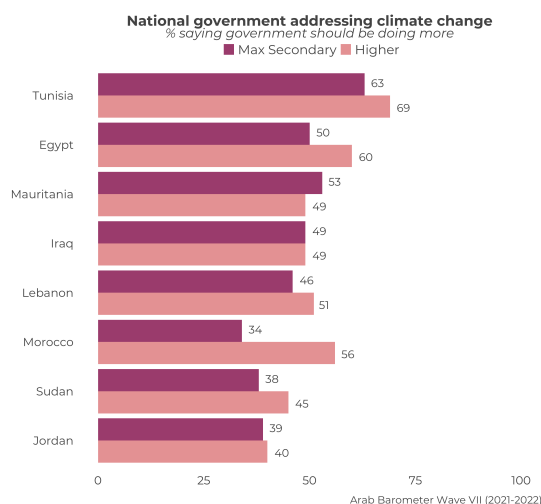
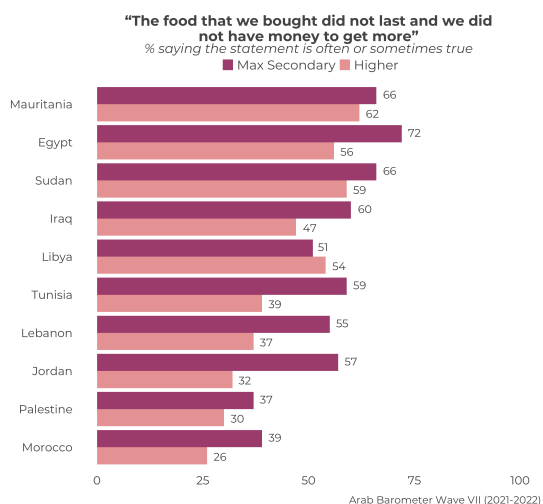
And in Egypt, where the shares of citizens reporting food scarcity is highest at 68 percent, higher temperatures, decreased rainfall, and higher salinity of irrigation on account rising sea levels affecting the Nile River, which provides 95 percent of the country's water, put the country on track see a 10 percent decrease of agricultural yields by 2050. These problems have prompted the Egyptian government to put in place the 2050 National Climate Change Strategy ahead of the 2022 UN Climate Change Conference (COP 27), which the country is scheduled to host in November.

Despite the documented effects of climate change on agriculture and thus food availability, the desire for governments to do more about climate change is mostly lukewarm among publics in surveyed Arab Barometer countries, with only a significant majority in Tunisia (64 percent) favoring increased governmental intervention. In Mauritania (52 percent), Egypt (52 percent), Iraq (49

percent), and Lebanon (48 percent), approximately half of all citizens want to see more government action on the issue.



More striking are the differences in the desire to see government action on climate change among those who do and do not face food insecurity. In all countries save Mauritania, where the pattern is reversed, and Jordan, where there is no significant difference, those who often or sometimes ran out of food are much less likely to want increased intervention. The gaps are extreme in Lebanon (25 points), Sudan (17 points), Egypt (16 points), and Morocco (15 points), with smaller differences in Iraq (6 points).

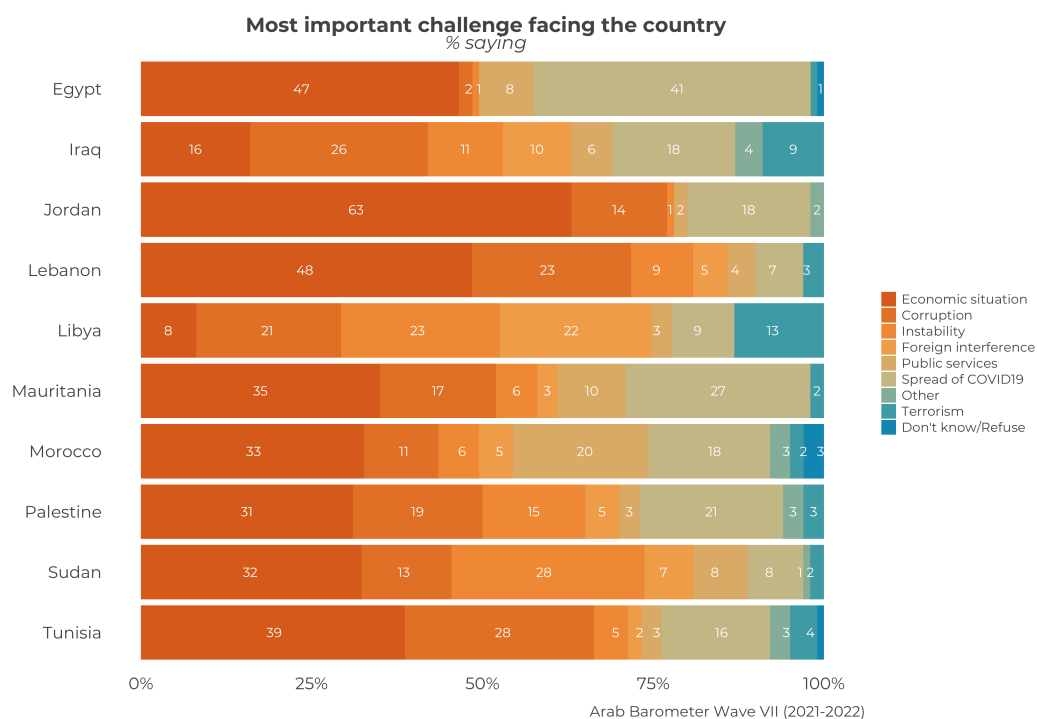


Yet the differences in desire for increased government intervention into climate change point to something other than an education-related gap. In all countries save Libya, those reporting food insecurity are much more likely to be less educated than their counterparts: in Jordan, 57 percent of citizens who ran out of food have at most a secondary school education, compared to only 32 percent of those who have higher degrees. This difference is similarly stark in Tunisia (20-point gap), Lebanon (18-point gap), Egypt (16-point gap), and Morocco (13-point gap). Notably, however, the desire to see increased government action on climate change neither varies in all the same countries nor to the same extent by education. For example, in Jordan, where there is a 25-point gap in food insecurity between those with max secondary versus higher education, the desire to see government action on climate change does not vary at all by education. This suggests that education level alone likely does not explain away the differences in desire for climate action between those who have and have not experienced food insecurity.

The causal chain linking climate change to food insecurity is not long, but there are more proximate reasons to which citizens can point, including increased prices and decreased supply of food. Rather than lack of awareness for the problem of climate change, publics experiencing food insecurity in surveyed MENA countries are potentially signaling that the efforts of their governments to address food scarcity should be focused elsewhere. This potentially suggests that efforts to address climate crisis need to be more clearly framed in terms of solving problems that are more proximate to the everyday challenges citizens face.

## **Food insecurity and citizens' economic preferences**

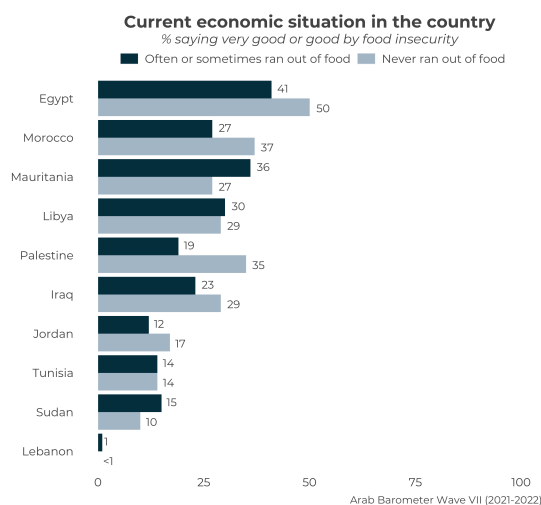
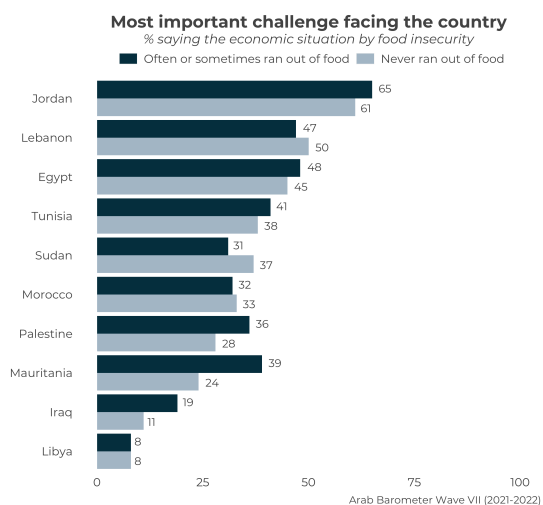
Most citizens in countries other than Iraq and Libya point to the economic situation as the most important challenge facing their country, with the share as high 63 percent in Jordan, just under half in each Lebanon (48 percent) and Egypt (47 percent), and around a third of all citizens in Morocco, Palestine, and Sudan. Furthermore, few say the economy is doing well: the share of citizens reaches a maximum of 45 percent in Egypt and bottoms out at less than 1 percent in Lebanon.



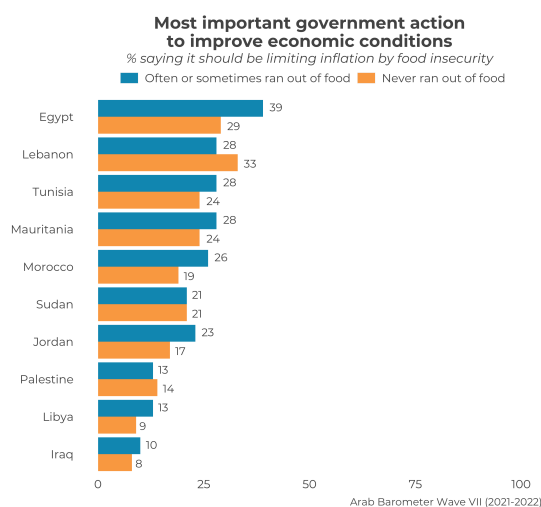
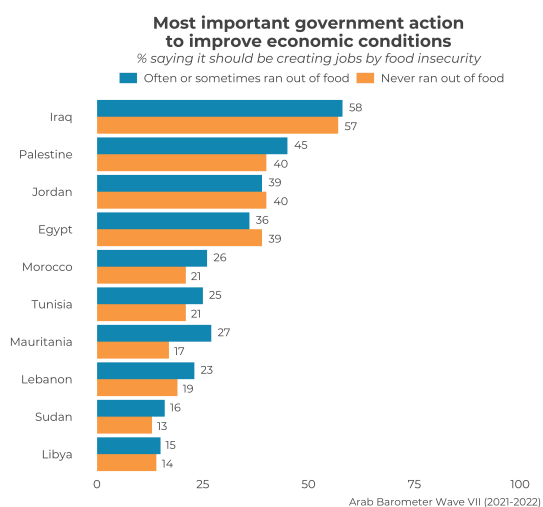
Both findings are amplified among citizens who often or sometimes ran out of food. In Jordan, Egypt, Tunisia, Palestine, Mauritania, and Iraq, food insecure citizens are likelier to report that the economic situation is their country's biggest challenge. They also are less likely than their food secure counterparts to suggest the economy is doing well in Egypt (41 vs. 50 percent), Morocco (27 vs. 37 percent), Palestine (19 vs. 35 percent), Iraq (23 vs. 29 percent), and Jordan (12 vs. 17 percent).

## Arab Barometer – Wave VII

### Food Insecurity Report



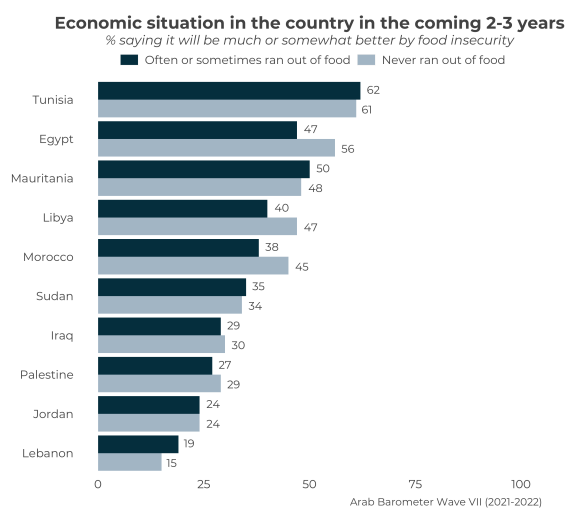
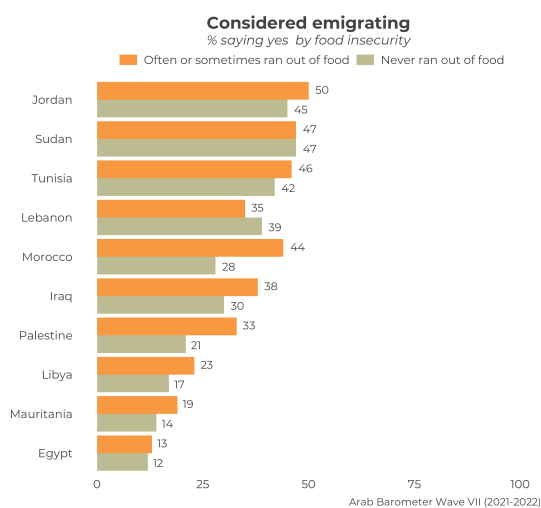
Commensurately, those experiencing food insecurity in Palestine, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania, and Lebanon are slightly more likely to say the government should improve economic conditions by creating jobs. And in Egypt, Jordan, and Libya, citizens who often or sometimes ran out of food express greater preference for the government to lower the cost of living by limiting inflation than their food secure counterparts.



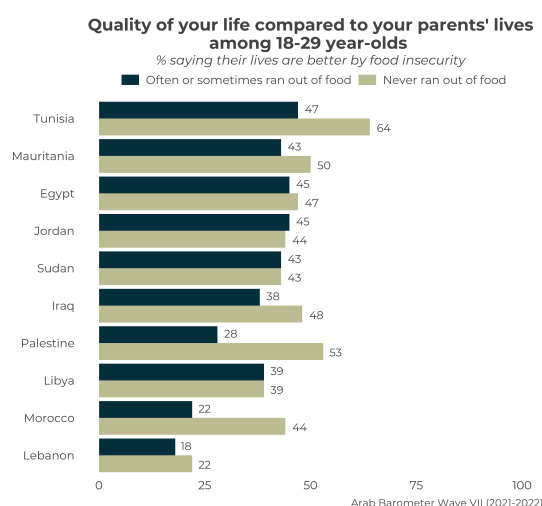
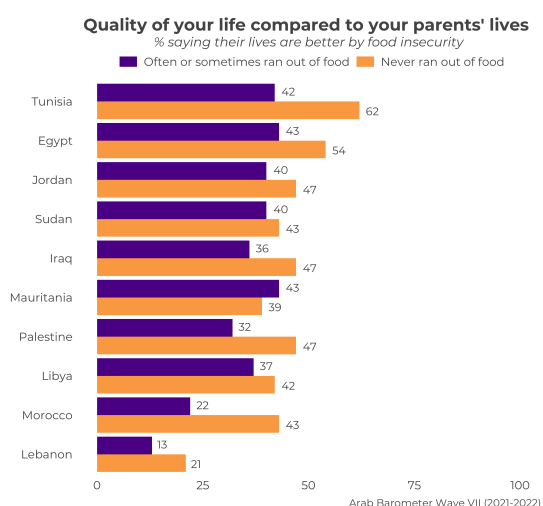
## Future plans and prospects among the food insecure

While differences pervading preferences for government action on the economy are present but small, the differences in those who have thought of leaving the country are larger. In all but Sudan, Lebanon, and Egypt, those suffering from food insecurity express higher desires to emigrate. These gaps are particularly salient in Morocco (16 points) and Palestine (12 points), ironically the two countries where reports of food scarcity are lowest at 36 and 34 percent, respectively.

In Morocco, this finding aligns with a significantly smaller share of food insecure citizens (38 percent) than food secure (45 percent) who believe that economic situation in their countries will improve in the coming two to three years. The lack of optimism among food insecure Moroccans is shared by food insecure Egyptians (47 percent insecure vs. 56 percent secure) and Libyans (38 percent vs. 45 percent).



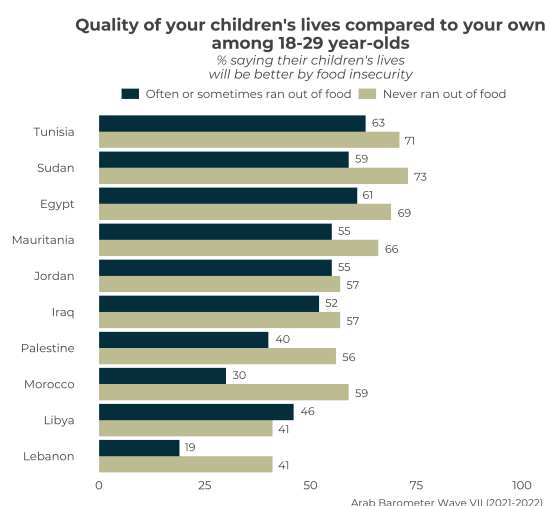
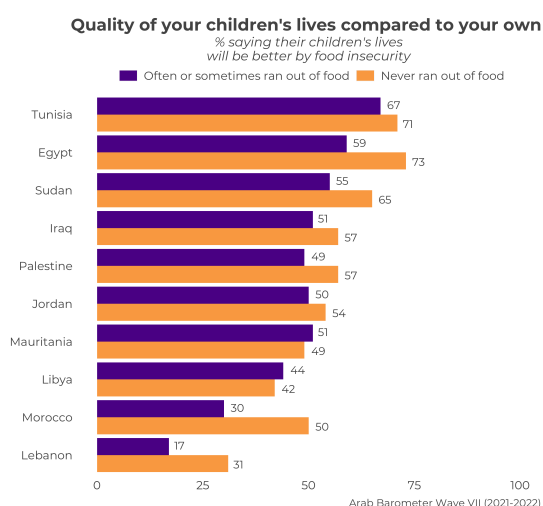
But it is not only the future of their countries' economies that has food insecure citizens in surveyed MENA countries concerned. Minorities of food insecure citizens in all 10 surveyed countries suggest that their lives are better than those of their parents. The difference is most pronounced in Tunisia and Egypt, where, in contrast, majorities of food secure citizens (62 and 54 percent, respectively) report their lives are better than the generation before. And in Tunisia, Mauritania, Iraq, Palestine, Morocco, and Libya, food insecure youth (18-29 year-olds) are less likely than their food secure counterparts to see their lives as better than their parents'.



Food insecure individuals' views on prospects for the future are also troubling. While majorities of Tunisians (67 percent), Egyptians (59 percent), and Sudanese (55 percent) and nearly half of all Iraqis (51 percent), Jordanians (50 percent), and Palestinians (49 percent) who often or sometimes ran out of food have hope that their children's lives will be better than their own, they are still less likely to maintain this view than food secure citizens in these countries. In Morocco and Lebanon, only minorities of food insecure citizens have this optimism, and the gaps are profound at 20 points and 14 points, respectively.

Furthermore, only in Libya does the country's food insecure youth have more faith than those who never ran out of food that the lives of their children will be better than their own. In the remaining nine countries, majorities who often or sometimes ran out of food in Tunisia, Egypt, Sudan, Mauritania, and Jordan see brighter futures for their children, but they do so at a significantly lower rate than those who are not struggling. The difference is particularly wide in Sudan and Mauritania, where there are 14- and 11-point gaps, respectively, between food insecure and secure youth on views about children's lives.

And as with comparisons with the lives of their parents, food insecure young people in Morocco and Lebanon, in addition to young Palestinians, are in the minority in expressing optimism when asked about their children's futures. Only 19 percent of Lebanese youth, 30 percent of Moroccan youth, and 40 percent of Palestinian youth say they believe their children's lives will be better than their own.



## Conclusion

In countries surveyed as part of Arab Barometer's seventh wave, the pervasiveness of food insecurity stands in contrast to multiple macrolevel assessments that otherwise signal high levels of human development in the MENA region. This juxtaposition is not new, but the fact that it endures is what merits attention. At best, progress toward addressing food security has stalled in the region. This is problematic not only because food insecurity itself is an existential challenge that needs to be addressed, but also because it does not exist in a vacuum. Experiencing food insecurity both affects perceptions and preferences of citizens on a host of interconnecting challenges.

These challenges highlighted by food insecurity differ from country to country or exist to varying degrees in different places. While a fault line for government preferences in Sudan and Morocco, food insecurity highlights gender inequality challenges in Iraq and Jordan, urban-rural divides in Lebanon and Tunisia, and environmental issues in Egypt. The focus of this report has been to highlight key differences between self-reported food secure and insecure citizens, but it is important to note that the concern about running out of food before being able to purchase more is as if not more pervasive. Citizens are all too aware that being food secure today does not prevent them from becoming food insecure tomorrow.

The lived experience of food insecurity is more encompassing than any facts or figures can capture, and its long-lasting consequences cannot easily be enumerated or disentangled from other aspects of life ranging from those discussed

in this report to others such as health and education outcomes and social norms and ideologies. Arab Barometer seventh wave findings suggest that given its pervasiveness and multiple reverberations, using food insecurity—a variable that arguably proxies socioeconomic class on the one hand and more structural phenomena related to production of and access to basic needs on the other—might be as beneficial to understanding current outcomes in the MENA region as other forms of identity politics.



## ABOUT ARAB BAROMETER

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

We have been conducting rigorous, and nationally representative public opinion surveys on probability samples of the adult populations across the Arab world since 2006 across 15 countries.

We are the longest-standing and 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.



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