

# Civic Engagement in the Middle East and North Africa

August 2019



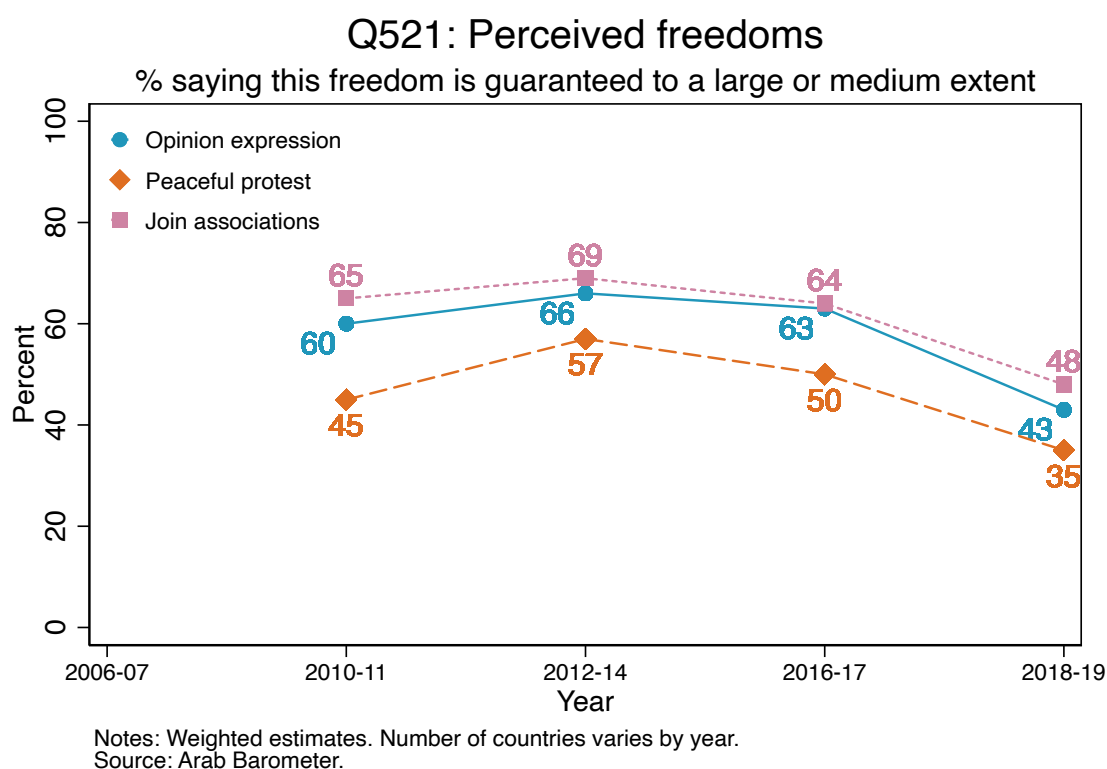
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## Key Findings

- Eight years after the Arab Spring, MENA publics believe that the degree to which their freedoms are guaranteed has declined. Arab Barometer observes a drop in perceived freedom of expression, right to protest peacefully, and to join associations since 2012-14.
- While electoral participation is low in many contexts, it appears that many MENA publics frequently take political issues to the streets. Youth are especially likely to protest, but few say they also used force for a political cause.
- The principle of charity is core to many religions, including Islam. Even though Arab Barometer has observed declining rates of charitable giving, overall a high percentage donate to the less fortunate across most countries.

## Introduction

During the Arab uprisings of 2011, political participation, especially protest action, increased dramatically across many countries in the Middle East and North Africa. However, the initial hope that these events would lead to broad improvements in the quality of governance across the region have since faded. Since the time of the uprisings, MENA publics have lost faith that basic freedoms are guaranteed in their countries, electoral participation is low, and non-electoral forms of participation remain uncommon. About half recognize the principle of sadaqa (*righteousness*)<sup>1</sup> as a better way to address poverty compared to taxes, while a similar percentage say that they frequently donate to charity or those in need. Yet, the proportion of people donating even if it induces personal costs has decreased overall.

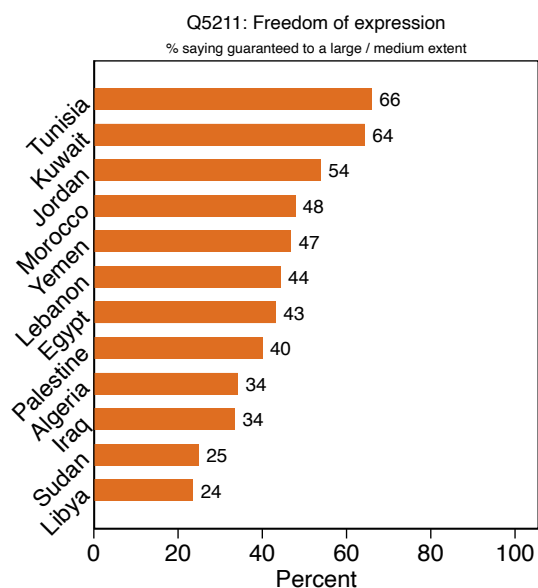


## Perceived Freedoms

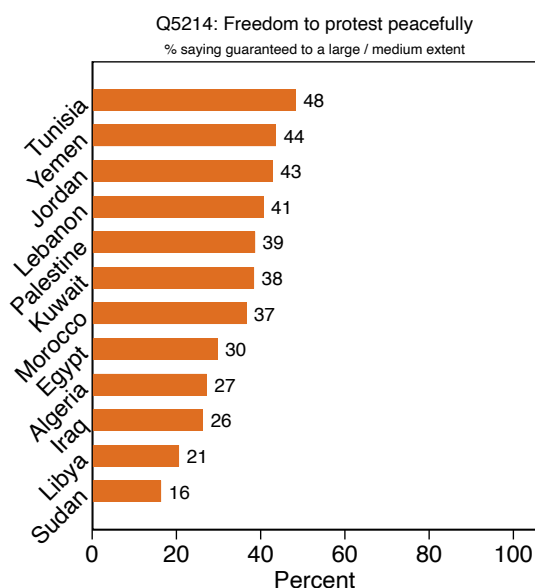
In 2019, disenchantment is rife across the MENA region while much of the hope from the time of the Arab uprisings having dissipated. Arab Barometer observed a small increase in perceived freedom of expression, the right to demonstrate peacefully, and the right to join associations from 2010-11 to 2012-14,

<sup>1</sup>Sadaqa refers to voluntary donating for charity with the ultimate intention of serving God.

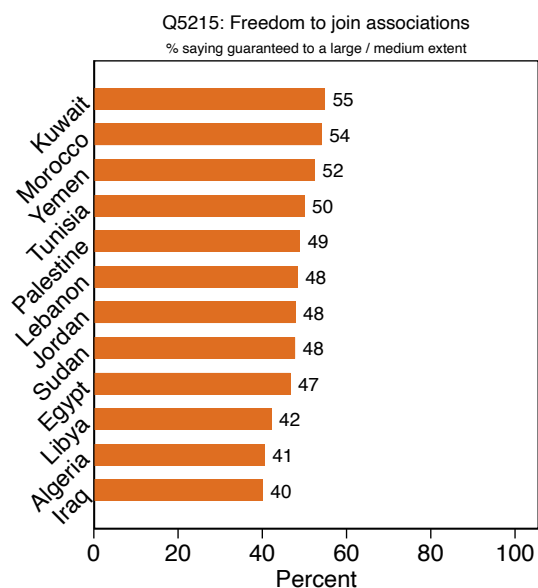
but a decline in the perceived degree to which freedoms are guaranteed can be observed in the time since. In 2018-19, roughly half of citizens across MENA say they enjoy the guaranteed right to join civil associations and four-in-ten (43 percent) say they can express their opinions freely, but only a third (35 percent) indicate that they think they have the guaranteed freedom to demonstrate peacefully.



Notes: Weighted estimates.  
Source: Arab Barometer.

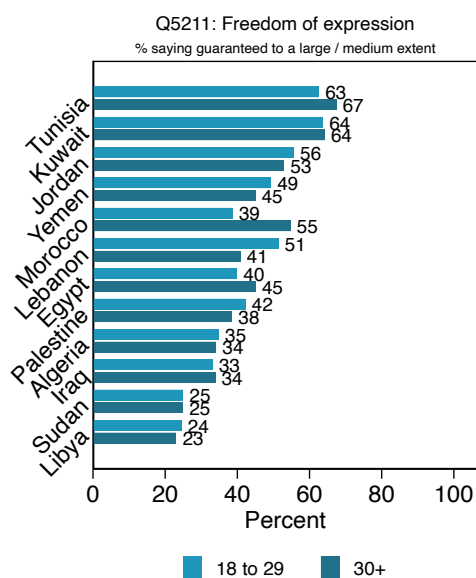


Notes: Weighted estimates.  
Source: Arab Barometer.

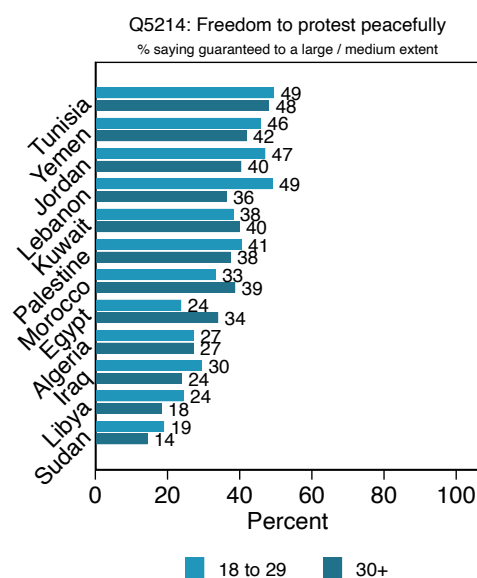


Notes: Weighted estimates.  
Source: Arab Barometer.

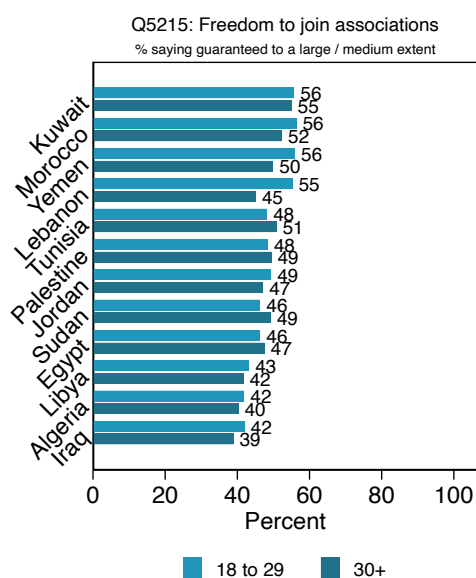
There is wide variation across countries, however. Looking at freedom of expression, especially Tunisians and Kuwaitis stand out, where roughly two-thirds indicate they enjoy freedom of expression. However, only one quarter of Sudanese and Libyans say the same.



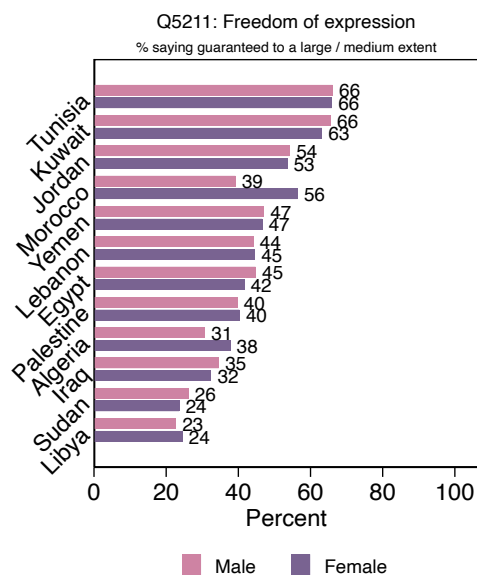
Notes: Weighted estimates.  
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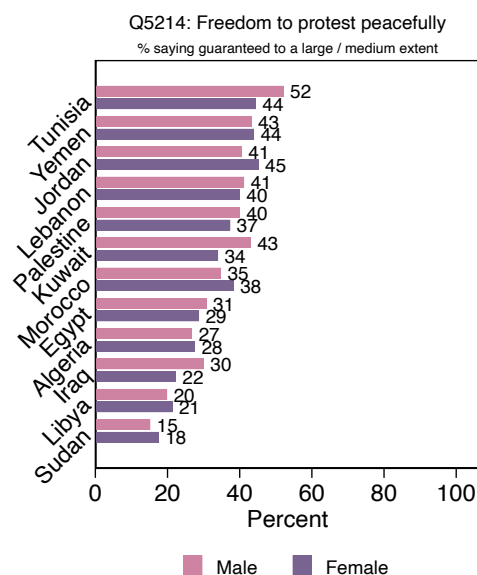
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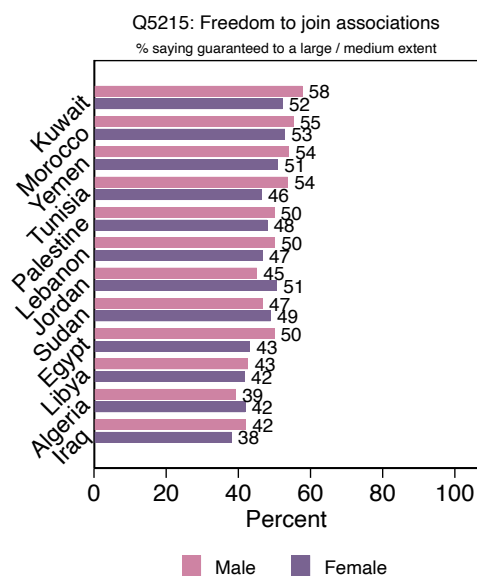
Notes: Weighted estimates.  
Source: Arab Barometer.



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Source: Arab Barometer.



Notes: Weighted estimates.  
Source: Arab Barometer.

In none of the MENA countries surveyed does the proportion of people saying they have the guaranteed right to demonstrate peacefully exceed 50 percent: Tunisians (48 percent), Yemenis (44 percent), and Jordanians (43 percent) are most likely to say they have this right compared to just Iraqis (26 percent), Libyans (21 percent), and Sudanese (16 percent). Less variation can be observed regarding the right to join associations, ranging from 55 percent saying they have this right in Kuwait to 40 percent who say the same in Iraq.

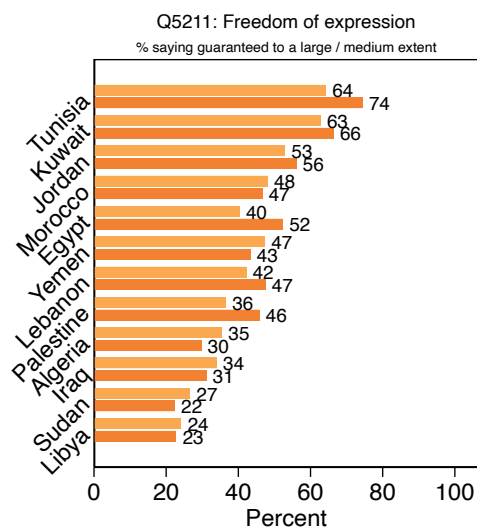
Perception of freedoms also varies somewhat by age, with Lebanon especially standing out on all three items. In this case, youth are more positive about their freedoms compared to older generations. Morocco stands out with the widest age gap on freedom of expression, although in this case older generations are more likely to say they have this right compared with youth.

Some variation can also be observed across gender, with males generally being more positive about their rights with a few exceptions such as Morocco, Algeria, Jordan, and Libya, where women are slightly more likely to say these freedoms are guaranteed.

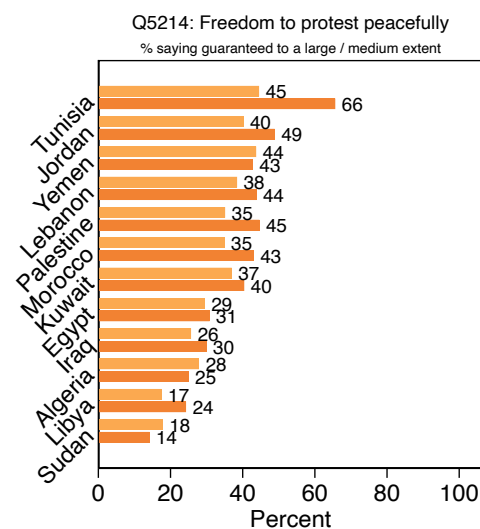
Looking at education, in general those with a higher level of education are more likely to say they enjoy the right to freedom of expression, to demonstrate peacefully, and to join associations. However, there are some exceptions. For example, less well educated Moroccans, Yemenis, Algerians, Iraqis, Sudanese, and Libyans are more likely to say they enjoy freedom of expression. Less well educated Yemenis, Algerians, and Sudanese are also more likely to say they have the right to protest peacefully. Again, less well educated Sudanese and Algerians are somewhat more likely to report that they have the right to join associations.

A mixed picture is painted when looking at income. Generally, those with a household income above the approximate median in their country are more likely to say they have guaranteed rights to express their opinions, to protest peacefully, or to join associations. However, there are exceptions to this trend including Kuwaitis, Palestinians, Iraqis, Egyptians, Algerians, and Sudanese on at least one of these three items.

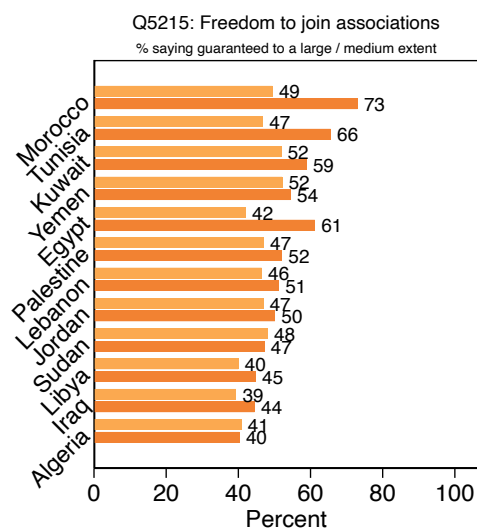
These findings indicate that MENA publics believe that some of their basic rights are constrained, but also that generally better educated and richer households feel more positive about their perceived freedoms than their counterpart.



Notes: Weighted estimates.  
Source: Arab Barometer.

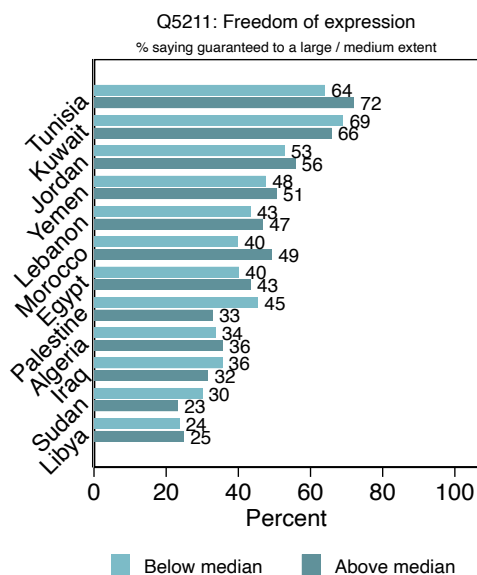


Notes: Weighted estimates.  
Source: Arab Barometer.

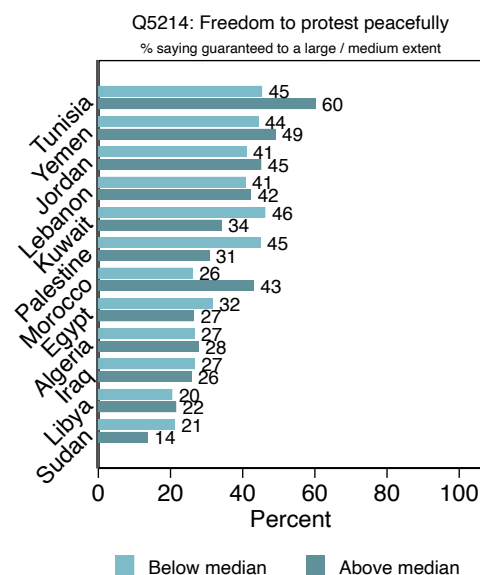


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Source: Arab Barometer.

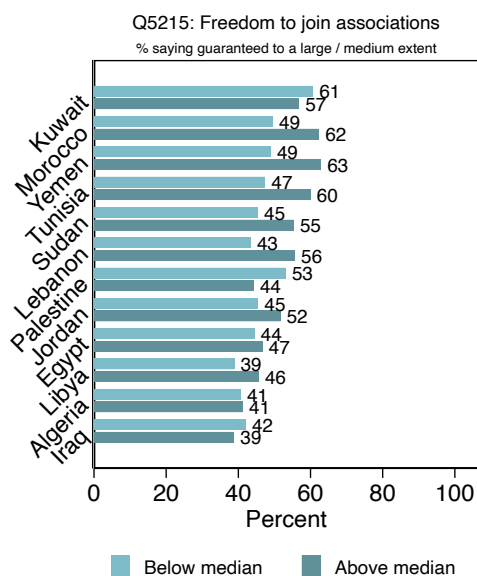




Notes: Weighted estimates.  
Source: Arab Barometer.



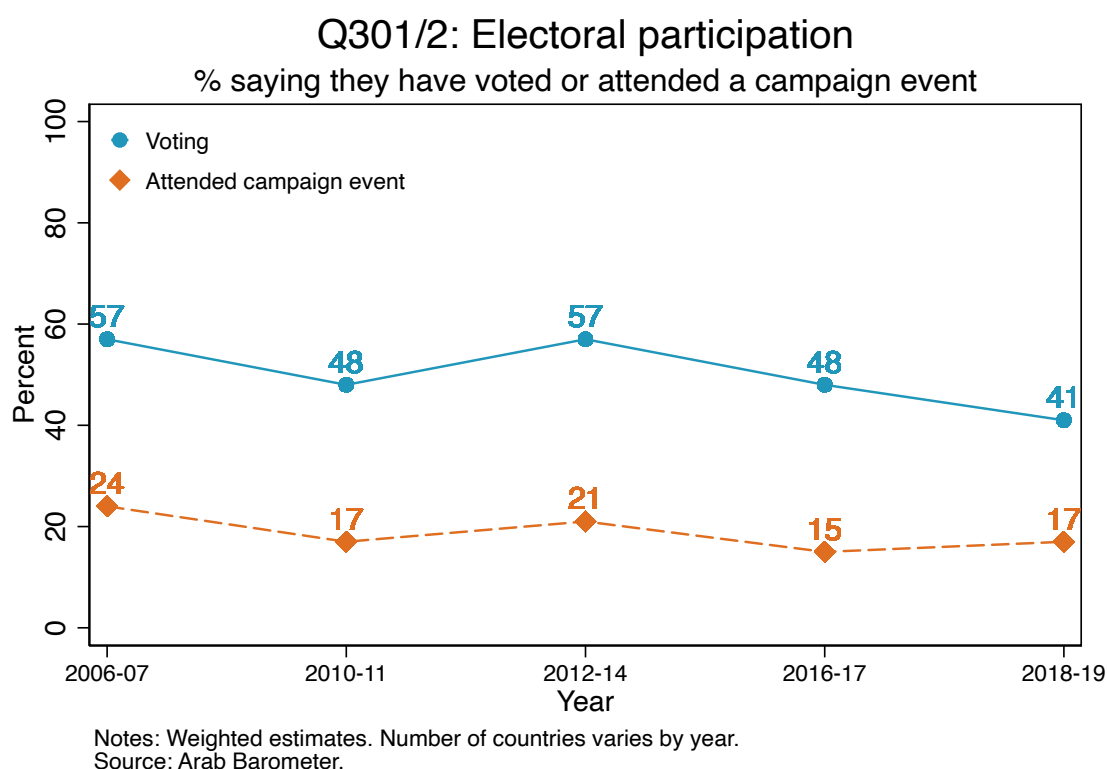
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Source: Arab Barometer.



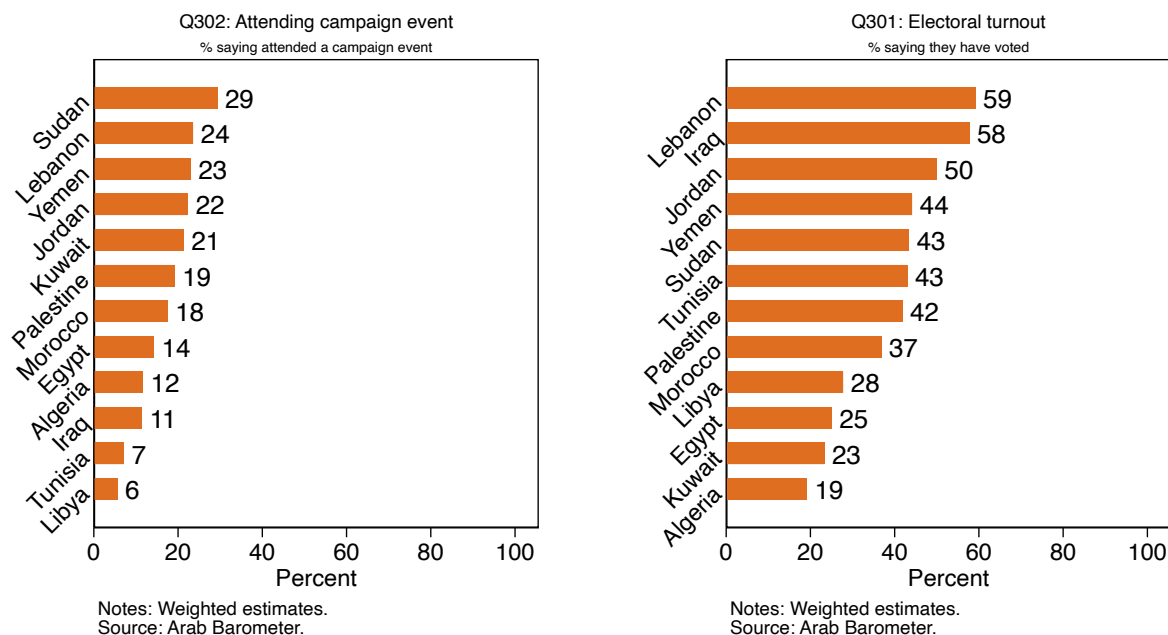
Notes: Weighted estimates.  
Source: Arab Barometer.

## Electoral Participation

In established democracies, electoral participation is a key indicator of civic engagement. However, most countries across the Middle East and North Africa, this relationship is more complex. Electoral disengagement may be a form of protest against the system demonstrating a refusal to engage in a process without meaningful political competition. Overall, relatively few citizens across MENA vote or otherwise engage in campaign events across the region.



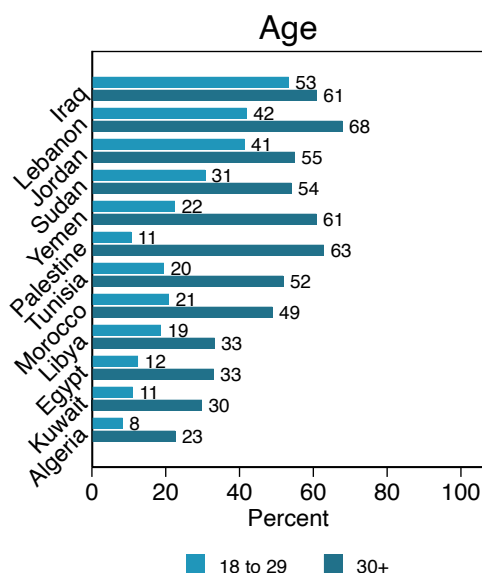
In 2018-19, across the region 17 percent say they have attended a campaign rally or other event during the previous parliamentary elections. Greater variation over time can be observed for electoral turnout. It peaked in 2012-14, the first full wave after the Arab uprisings of 2011, with 57 percent overall, but in 2018-19 it dropped to just four-in-ten saying they participated in the last elections, which is the lowest since Arab Barometer began fielding surveys.



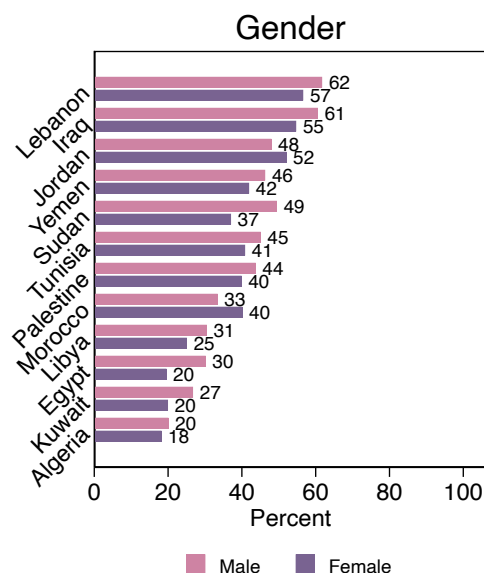
Participation in campaign events varies from 29 percent in Sudan to only 6 percent saying they went to an event in Libya during the last parliamentary election. It is noteworthy that campaign participation appears to follow a pretty consistent pattern, with older generations, men, highly educated and wealthier citizens more likely to take part in rallies or other electoral events.

Turning to voting, Lebanon (59 percent), Iraq (58 percent), and Jordan (50 percent) stand out as the countries with the highest reported turnout in the last parliamentary election, while Libya (28 percent), Egypt (25 percent), and Algeria (19 percent) as the countries with the lowest reported turnout overall in the last parliamentary election.

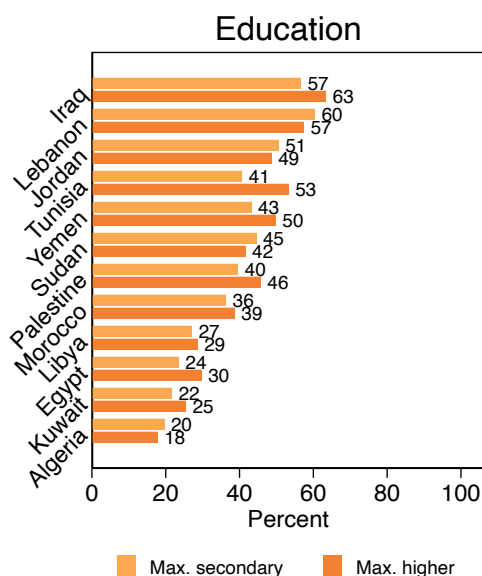
Overall, older generations are much more likely to report that they have voted in the last parliamentary election compared to youth. With the exception of Morocco and Jordan, men are more likely to report voting compared with women. Similarly, well educated people are more likely to turn out, with the exception of Lebanon, Jordan, and Sudan. It also appears that voting is tied to income, with citizens whose household income is above the approximate median level in their country being more likely to turn out.



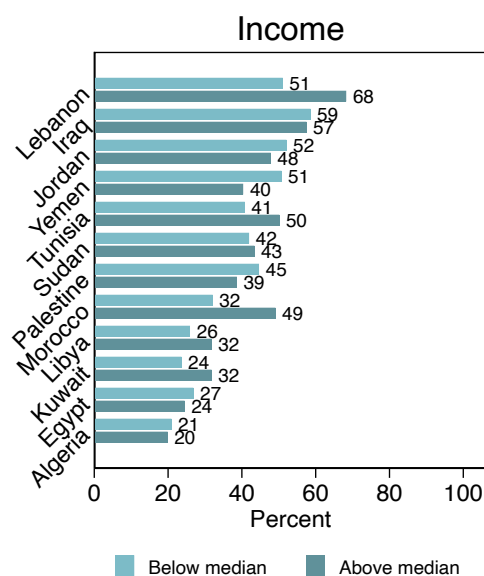
Notes: Weighted estimates.  
Source: Arab Barometer.



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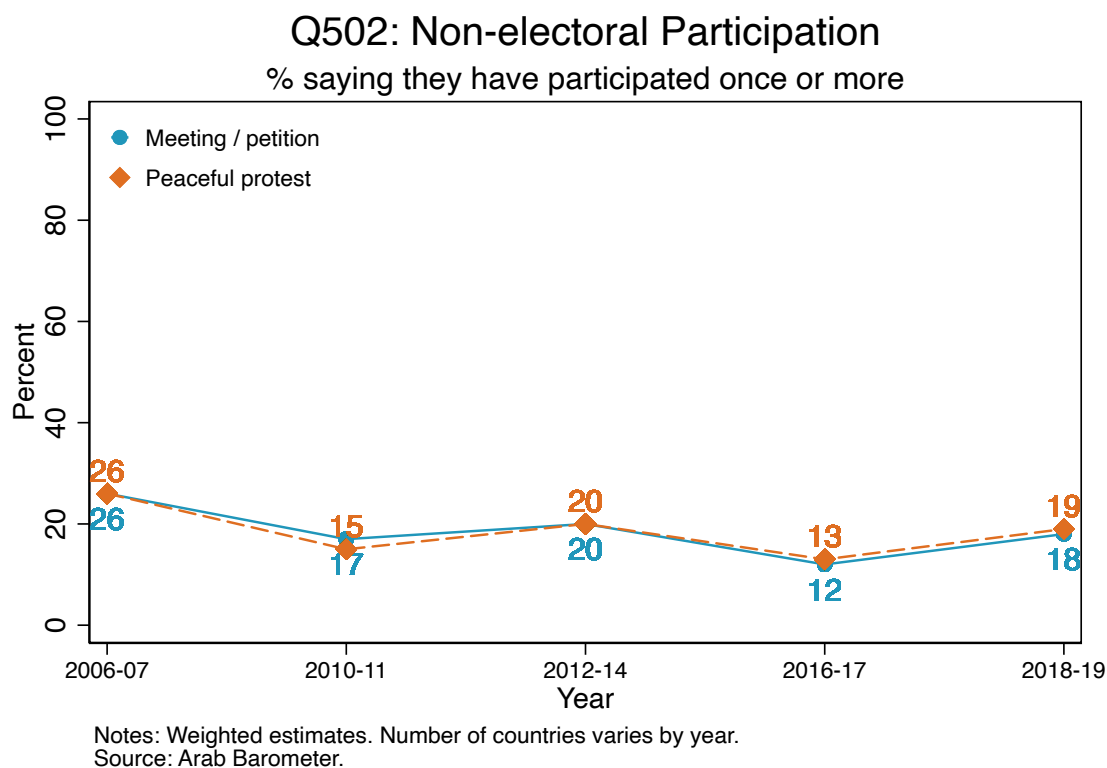


Notes: Weighted estimates.  
Source: Arab Barometer.

Arguably, electoral turnout is not a good indicator of civic engagement in the MENA region, as many countries have not held elections for years or elections are far from free and fair. In addition to this caveat, some people may have forgotten whether or not they turned out, particularly if the last election was held years ago. In the case of Palestine, for example, the last legislative election is dated back to 2006, so many youth were not eligible to take part explaining

the very low reported turnout rate for youth in Palestine.

However, MENA publics have other means of civic engagement apart from participating in formal elections by taking part in informal politics to influence events in their countries.

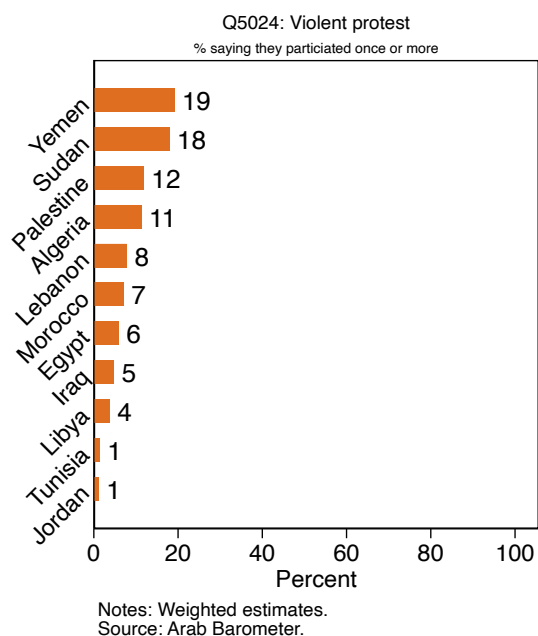
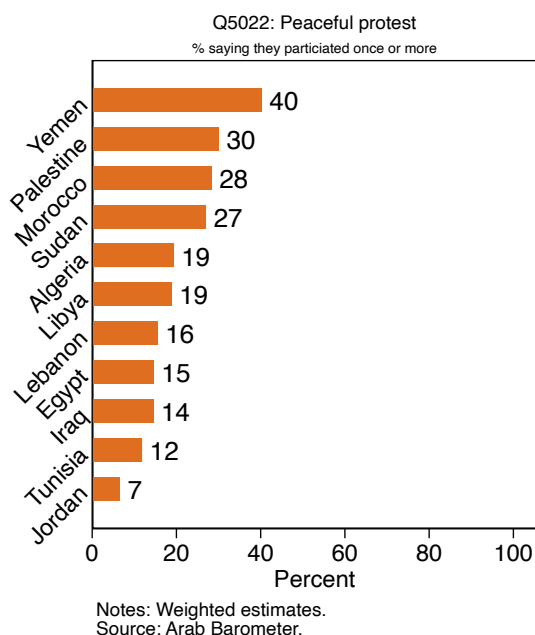
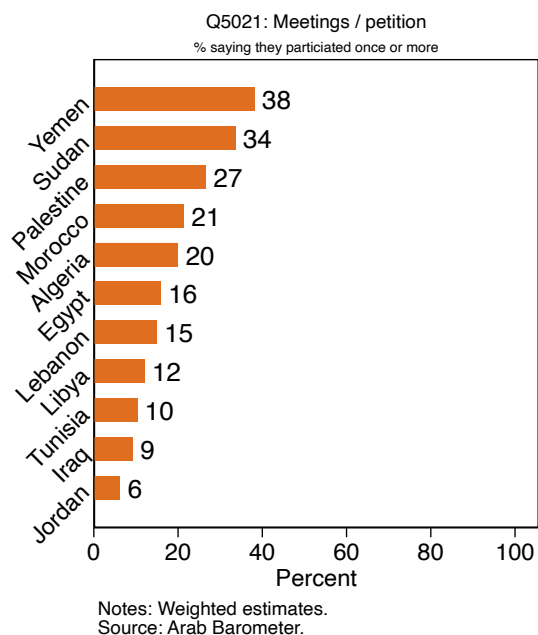


## Non-electoral Participation

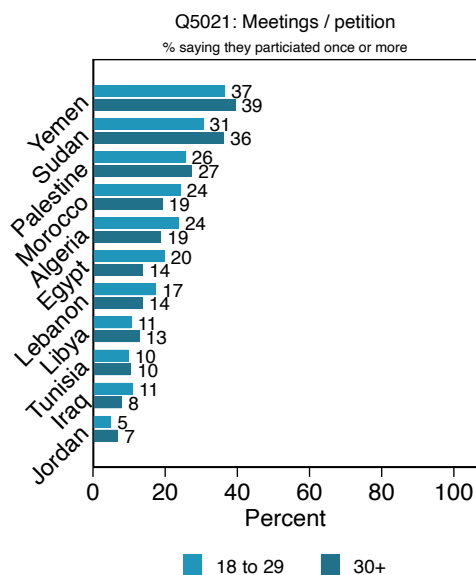
Non-electoral participation represents an informal way beyond voting of taking part in the political process. Since its first wave in 2006-7, Arab Barometer has asked MENA citizens if within the last three years they have participated in political meetings or signed a petition, or if they have engaged in a peaceful demonstration. Overall, some variation can be observed for both items over time, with the overall level ranging from just 12 percent in 2016-7 to 26 percent in 2006-7.

There is wider variation across countries, however. Yemenis (38 percent), Sudanese (34 percent), and Palestinians (27 percent) report the greatest engagement in meetings and signing petitions within the last three years. Tunisians (10 percent), Iraqis (9 percent), and Jordanians (6 percent) are least likely to have engaged in these means of participation.

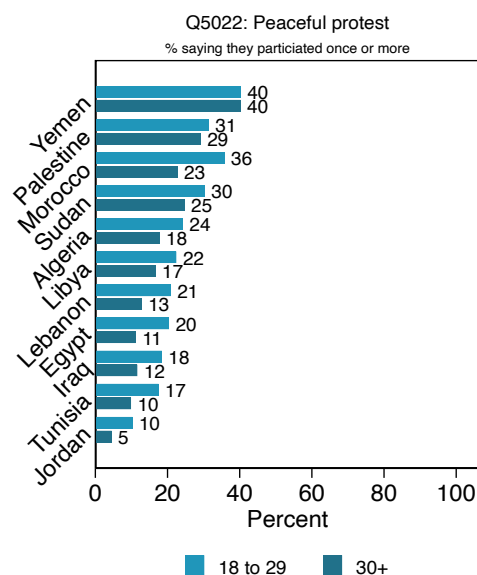
Looking at participation in peaceful demonstrations, Yemenis (40 percent), Palestinians (30 percent), Moroccans (28 percent) are most likely to have done so, followed by Sudanese (27 percent), Algerians and Libyans (19 percent). The latter may not be surprising giving that protests occurred towards the end of fieldwork in both Sudan, Algeria, and Libya. Jordanians are least likely to engage in protest, only 7 percent say they have done this in the past three years.



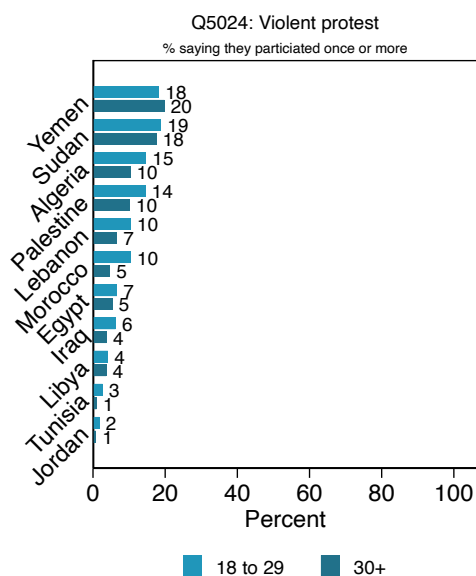
For the first time in the fifth wave, Arab Barometer asked about participation in protests that included violence. Yemenis (19 percent), Sudanese (18 percent), and Palestinians (12 percent) are most likely to say they have engaged in force or violence for a political cause in the past three years, although the exact type of activity employed is not clear from the survey.



Notes: Weighted estimates.  
Source: Arab Barometer.



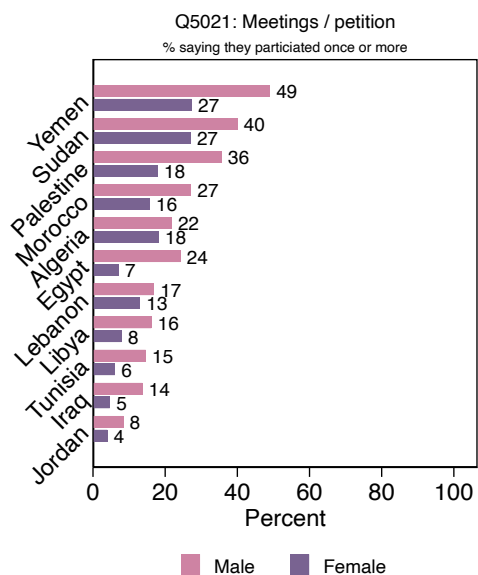
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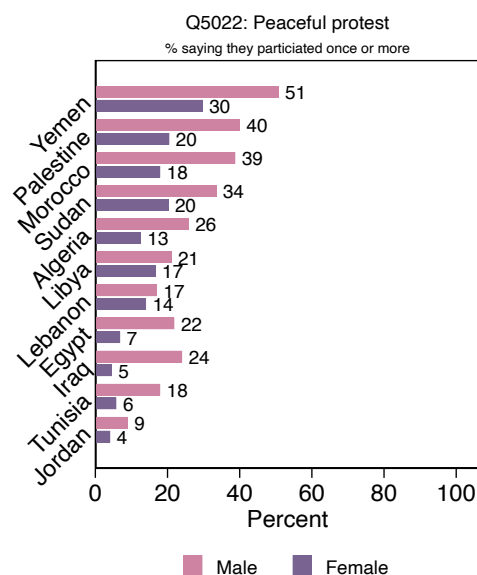
Notes: Weighted estimates.  
Source: Arab Barometer.

This result is not entirely surprising given ongoing conflicts in these three countries. Meanwhile, Tunisians and Jordanians are least likely to say that they have taken part in violent protest in the past three years: Only 1 percent say they have used force for a political cause in both countries.

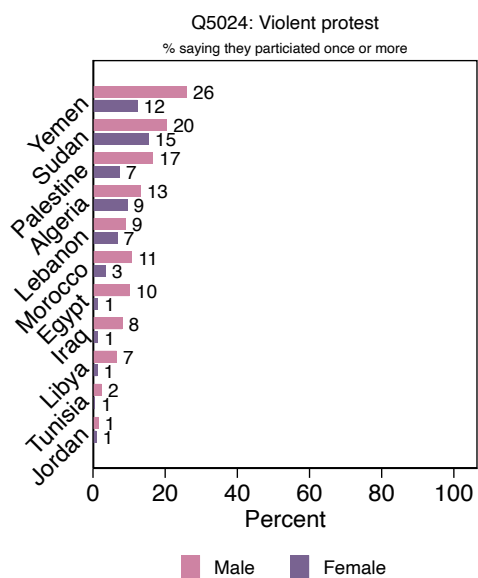




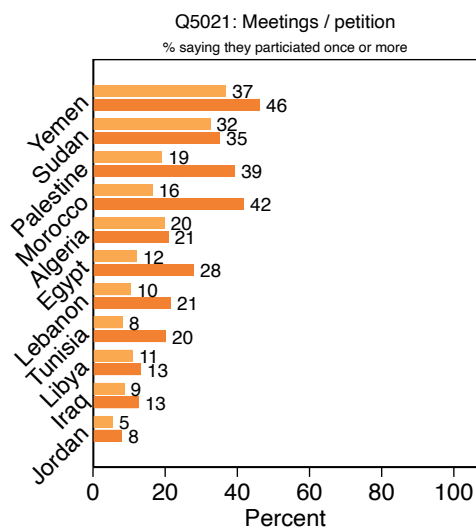
Notes: Weighted estimates.  
Source: Arab Barometer.



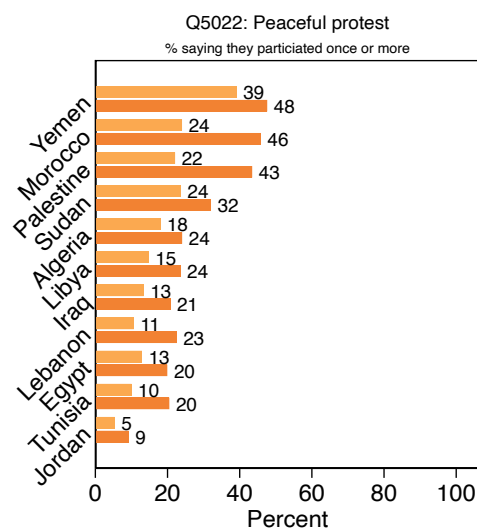
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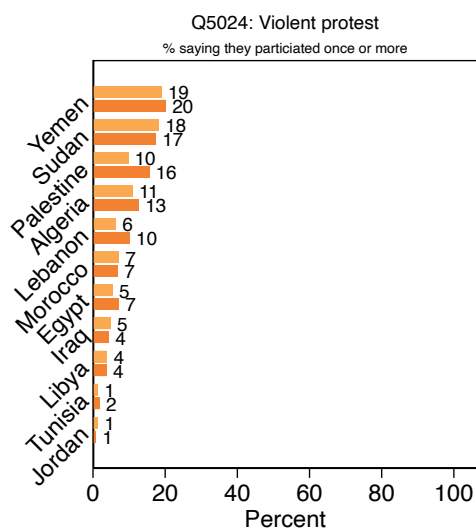
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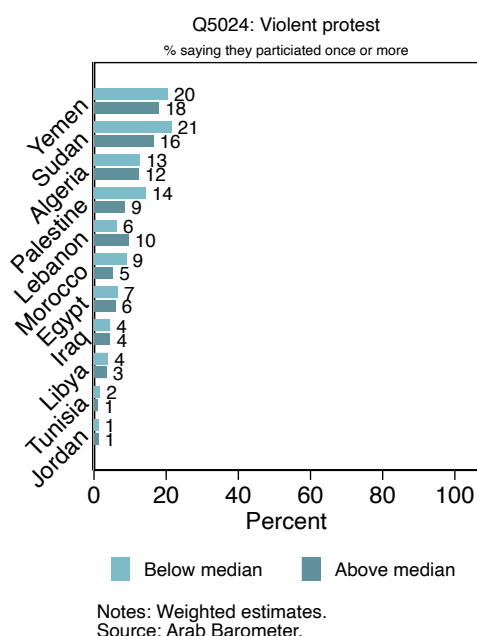
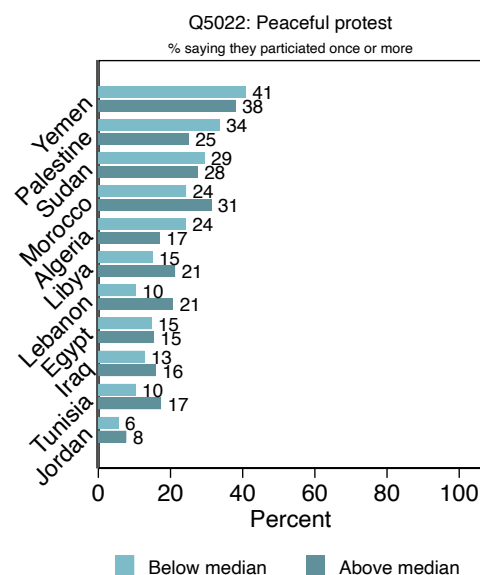
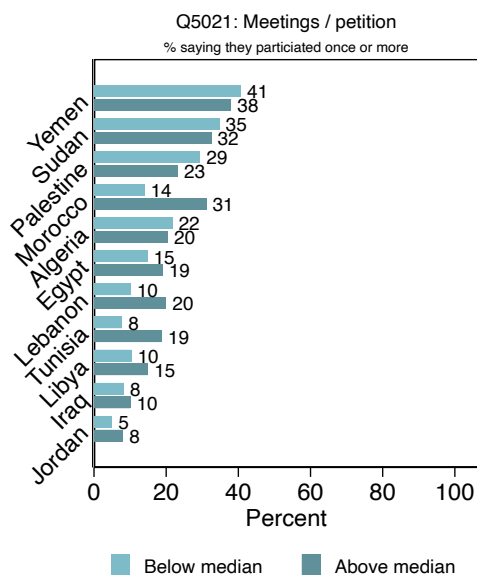
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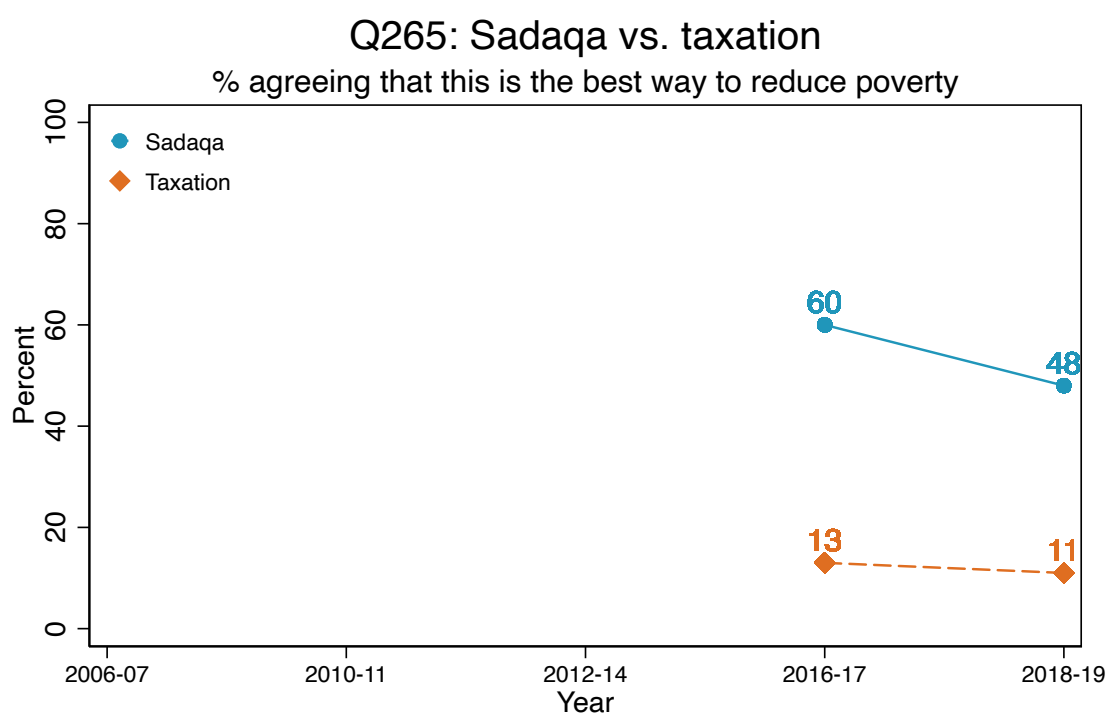
Mixed results are found looking at demographic differences for those taking part in political meetings or signing petitions: In Yemen, Sudan, Palestine, Libya, and Jordan older generations are more active, but in all other countries youth are more likely to participate using these means. Other forms of non-electoral participation also differ by age, with younger generations being more likely to

take to the streets or even using force for a political cause.

The findings further suggest that political participation beyond voting tends to be male-dominated: Across all items and countries, men are more likely to report that they have taken part in the different forms of participation over the past three years.

Typically, non-electoral civic engagement is viewed as means of participation engaged in by better educated citizens. Across countries and items, this assumption seems to largely hold for MENA countries: Those with higher education and are more likely to report that they participated in the political process using these means.

For income, however, the pattern is less clear. While those with incomes above their country's approximate median are generally more likely to participate in meetings and signing petitions as well as to engage in peaceful protest, it is lower-income groups who more frequently report using force for a political cause.



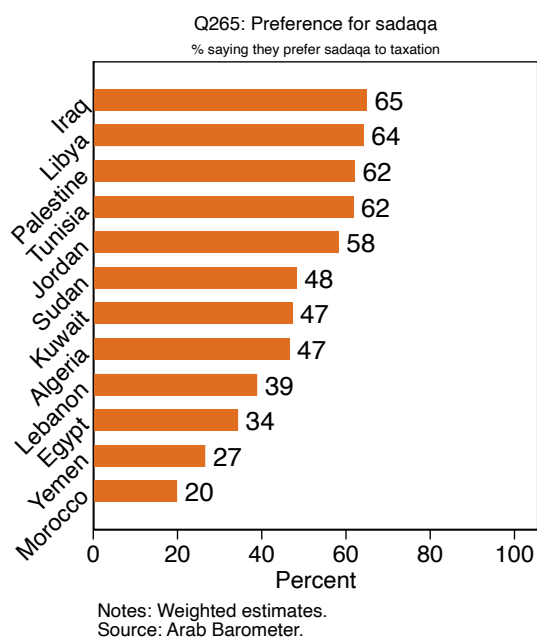
Notes: Weighted estimates. Number of countries varies by year.  
Source: Arab Barometer.

## Charity

Charity is a core value of many religions, including Islam. The concept of *sadaqa* (righteousness) or donating for those in needs to reduce poverty is widespread

across the region. Overall, most publics in the MENA region believe the principle of sadaqa over the idea of taxation as the most effective way to help those in need. In 2016-17, 6-in-10 said that they would prefer sadaqa as the best way of reducing poverty compared to only 13 percent saying taxation is the way forward. However, the region observed a 12-point drop in preference for sadaqa compared to a smaller 2-point fall in the preference for taxation over this period. Have Arab citizens become less charitable? While economic problems and high unemployment may be some reasons for a drop in perceptions, it is also noteworthy that the number of countries in the latest wave is larger than in 2016-17 which may explain the presumably steeper decrease.

Looking at preferences for sadaqa, two thirds of Iraqis, 64 percent of Libyans and 62 percent of Palestinians and Tunisians say that sadaqa is the best way to reduce poverty, compared to only one third in Egypt, 27 percent in Yemen and 2-in-10 in Morocco who saying the same.

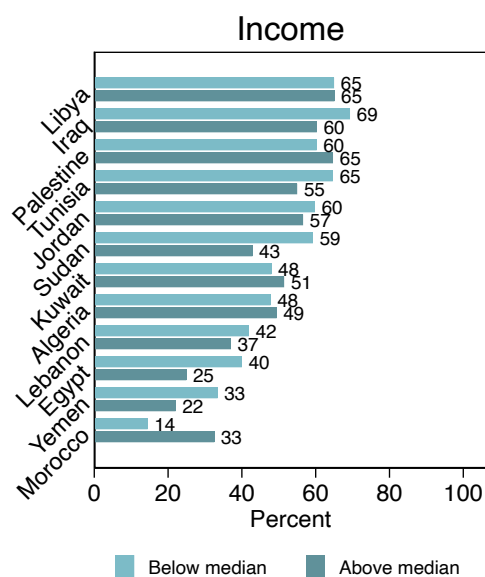
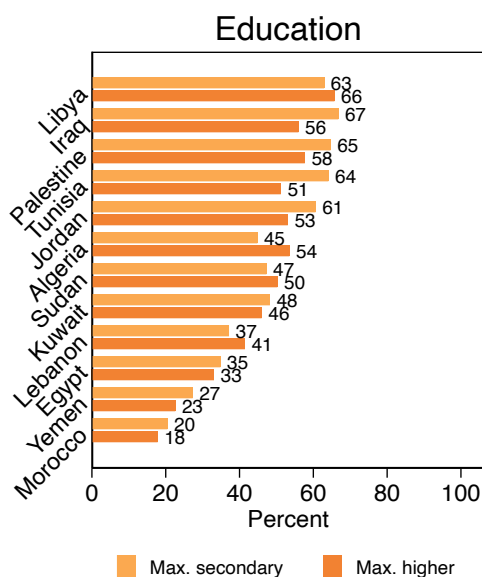
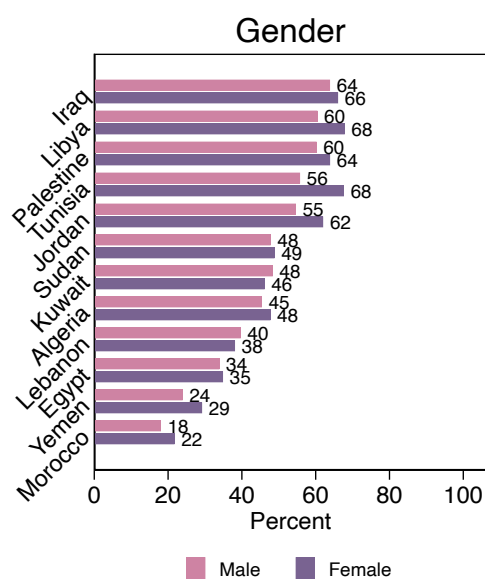
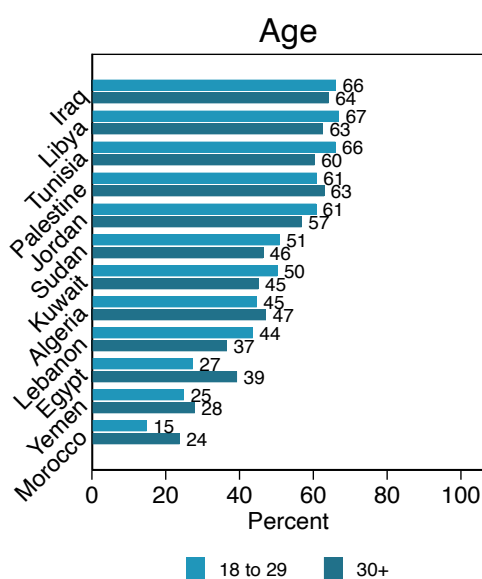


Examining differences by age yields mixed results. While youth in Iraq, Libya, Tunisia, Jordan, Sudan, Kuwait, and Lebanon prefer sadaqa over taxation, it is older generations in the other countries surveyed who voice a preference for sadaqa.

Women across the region seem to consistently voice a stronger preference for sadaqa when compared to men, with the exception of Sudan, Kuwait, and Lebanon, where no substantive difference is found.

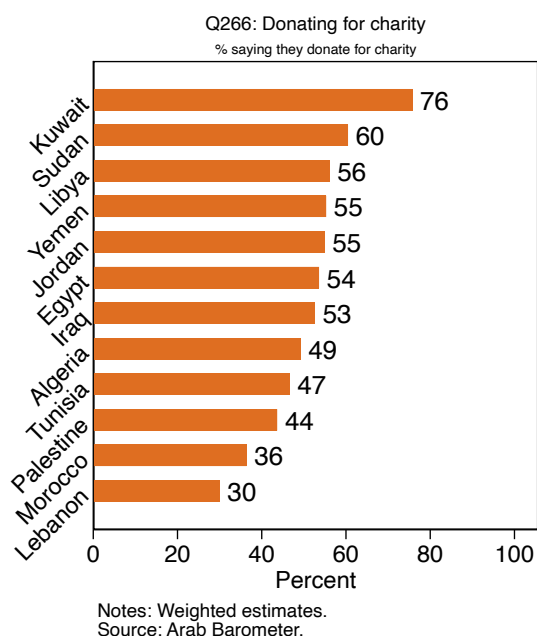
Arab Barometer also does not observe a consistent pattern regarding educa-

tion. While in 8 countries those who are less well-educated appear more likely to prefer sadaqa, it is those with higher levels education in Libya, Algeria, Lebanon, and Sudan who are more likely to prefer the principle of sadaqa.



Mixed results can also be observed across incomes. In seven countries (Iraq, Tunisia, Jordan, Sudan, Lebanon, Egypt, and Yemen) those with a household income below the approximate median level are more likely to voice a preference for sadaqa. Meanwhile, high income groups in Kuwait and Morocco are more likely to say they prefer sadaqa. There is no substantive difference in the remaining countries.

The principle of sadaqa may also play a role when asking people about donating to charity. In an average month, half across MENA report donating to charity. About three quarters of Kuwaitis do so, followed by six-in-10 Sudanese, and 56 percent of Libyans. Meanwhile, 44 percent of Palestinians, 36 percent of Moroccans, and three-in-ten Lebanese do the same.

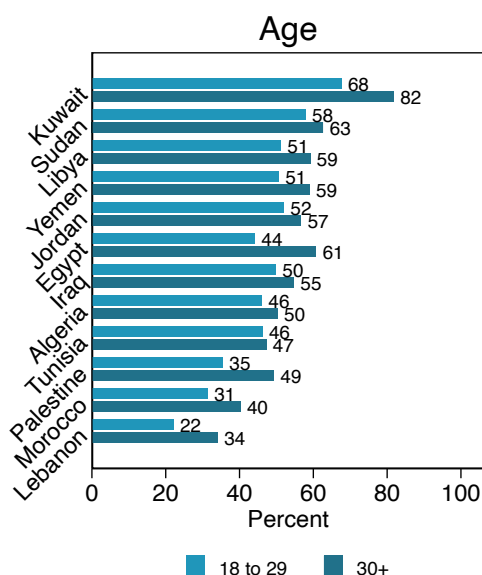


Throughout the region, older generations are more likely to report donating to charity in an average month compared to those who are younger.

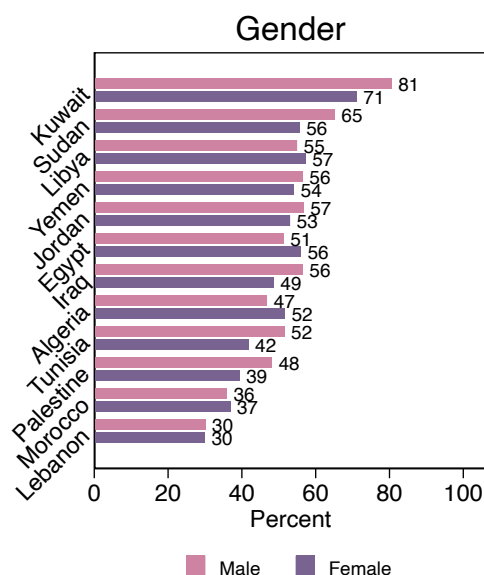
Little variation can be observed across gender. In most countries males are somewhat more likely to report that they donate in an average month, although it women are more likely to do so in Egypt and Algeria. No substantive difference can be observed in Libya, Morocco, and Lebanon.

Those with higher levels of education are also more likely to have given to charity in an average month in all countries, except Kuwait and Yemen, where no substantive difference across education can be found. Additionally, those with higher income are more likely to frequently donate for charity in all countries. These findings are unsurprising, as those who have a higher socio-economic

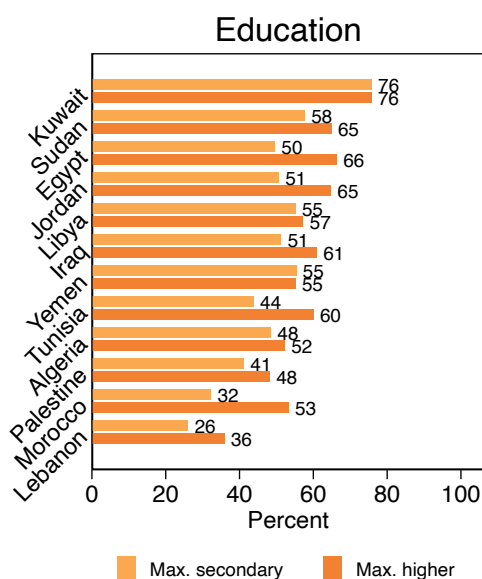
status are more likely to be able to have the resources to give to those in relative need.



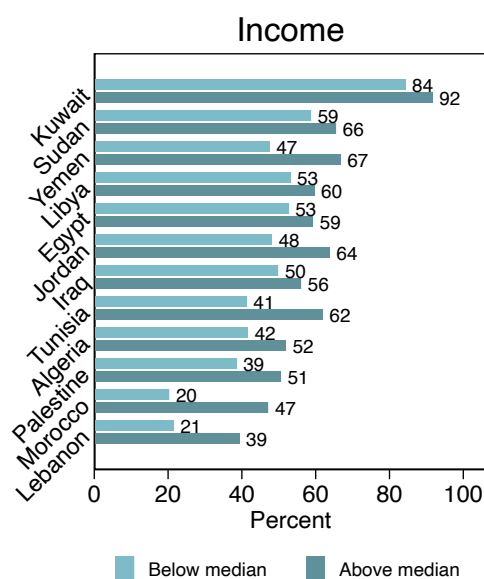
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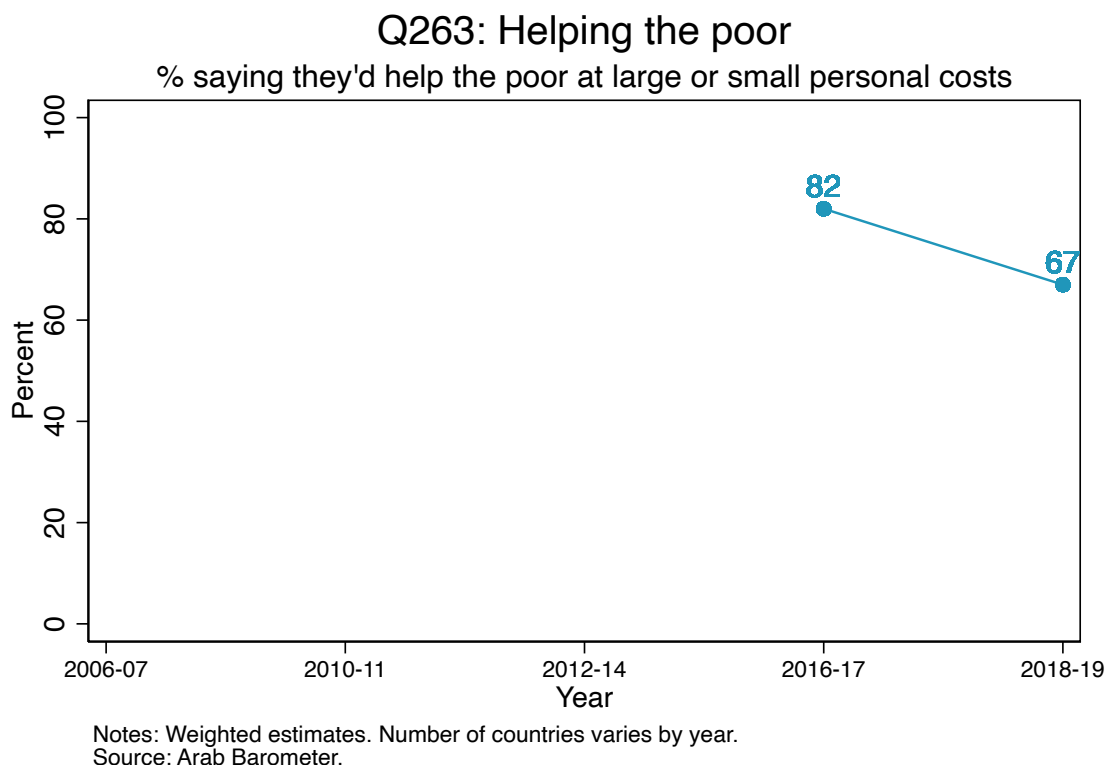
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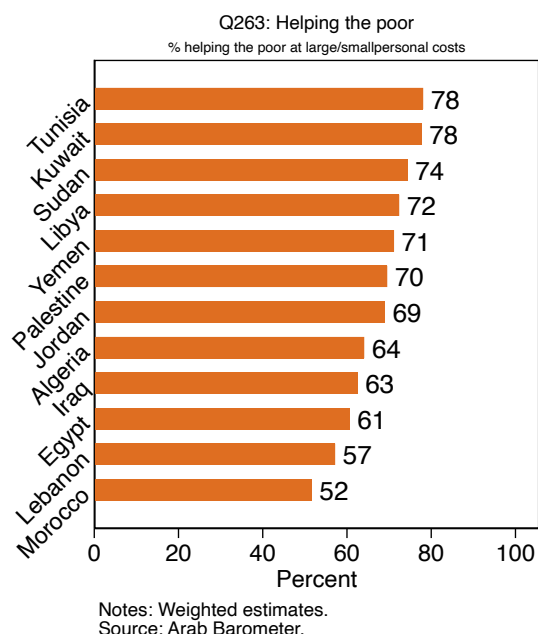
Notes: Weighted estimates.  
Source: Arab Barometer.



At what costs are people willing to help the poor? Looking at the trend from the 2016-17, it appears that fewer are willing to help the poor at large or small personal cost. However, putting things in perspective, as the number of countries varies across waves, these numbers may not be directly comparable.

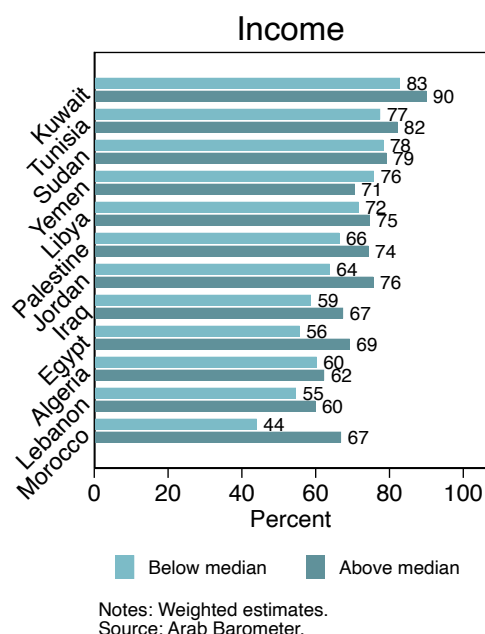
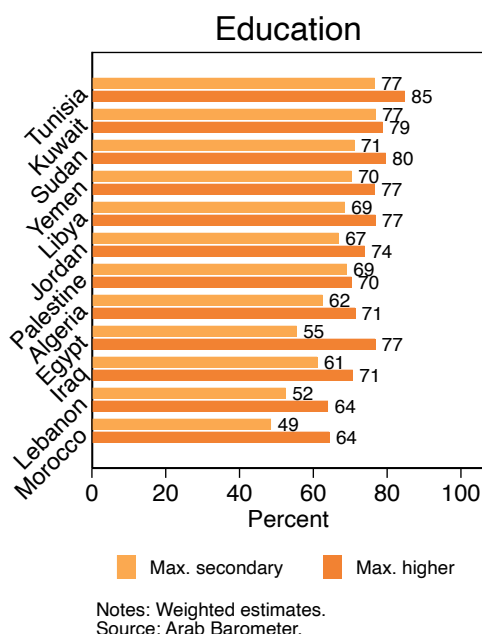
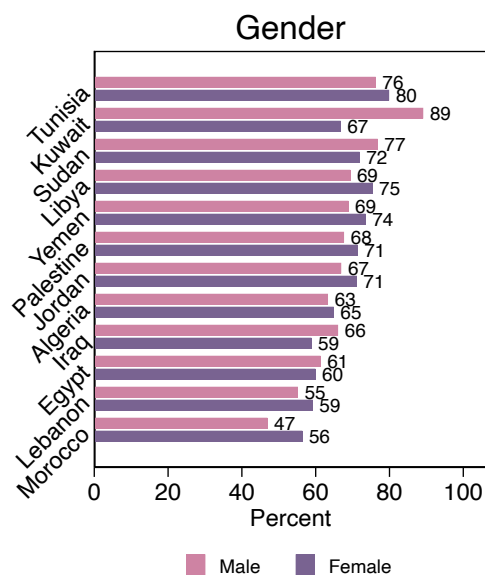
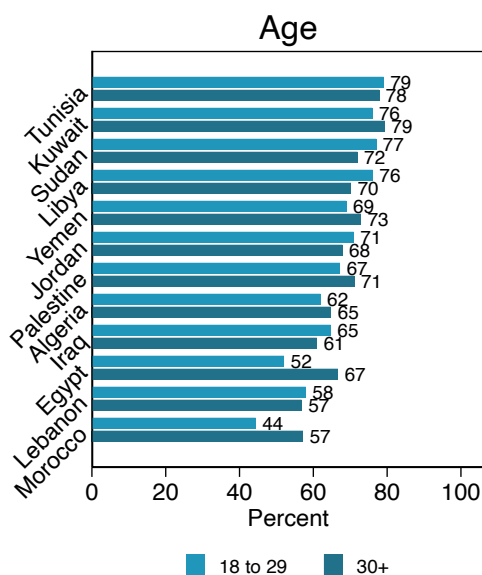


Variation can be observed across countries. Tunisians and Kuwaitis are most likely to report they are willing to help the poor even if it means they have large or small personal costs: over three quarters say this is the case. Lebanese (57 percent) and Moroccans are the least likely to say they would help the poor at a personal cost. However, it is noteworthy that in none of the countries surveyed the proportion of people saying they would be willing to help the poor even if they have large or small personal costs falls below 50 percent. Arab publics are very charitable overall.



Little variation in willingness to help the poor can be observed across age: the age gap is largest in Egypt and Morocco, where older people are substantively more likely to report they are willing to help the poor even at personal costs.

Women tend to be more charitable when compared to men in all but four countries. In Kuwait, Sudan, Iraq, and Egypt, men appear to be more likely to say they are willing to help the poor. Additionally, throughout the region, those with higher education and who are wealthier are more likely to report that they are willing to give to the poor even if there is a personal cost.



## Conclusion

The hope that accompanied the period after the Arab uprisings of 2011 has receded. Eight years after the uprisings, fewer MENA publics perceive their rights

and freedoms to guaranteed by their governments. A decline in electoral participation further signifies that Arabs are disenchanted with politics. However, many people are still willing to engage in informal participation to voice their concerns. Even during the field period of the Arab Barometer surveys unrest in Sudan, Algeria, and Libya occurred, while conflicts in other contexts such as Palestine and Yemen continued.

Meanwhile, it appears that Arab publics have a deep sense of community engagement. The concept of sadaqa is preferred by people across the region. Many give for charity frequently and are willing to help the poor even at personal costs.



## 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 face-to-face public opinion surveys on probability samples of the adult populations across the Arab world since 2006. The margin of error is  $\pm 3$  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.



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