ARAB VOICES ON THE CHALLENGES OF THE NEW MIDDLE EAST

PERRY CAMMACK AND MARWAN MUASHER | **FEBRUARY 12, 2016**

The array of challenges facing the Middle East—terrorism and extremism; civil war and foreign intervention; sectarianism, corruption, and authoritarianism—is both daunting and dismaying. With so many problems, it is difficult to know where to begin to address them and what roles outside actors, including the United States, should play. This conundrum is the starting point for the first survey of Arab experts conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace's Middle East Program. Questions were asked in both English and Arabic, and the survey represents the detailed views of 105 experts from almost every Arab country. These men and women are some of the region's most accomplished political thinkers. They include civil society leaders and activists, industry leaders, scholars, former cabinet ministers, parliamentarians, and advisers to heads of state. Some emerged during the Arab Awakening; others have decades of experience.

This survey is qualitative rather than quantitative in nature. The experts were not randomly selected, and the results are not necessarily representative of the broader Arab public. But as voices that might press for and lead efforts for change and reform, they provide considerable insight into the Middle East's policy dilemmas. The experts' views are complex and often contradictory. However, three themes in particular stand out: government legitimacy, prioritization of local concerns, and democratic prospects.

Government Legitimacy: Five years after the Arab Spring, the crisis of legitimacy that helped precipitate it has lost neither its resonance nor its urgency. The experts are almost unanimous in their extreme dissatisfaction with their governments' responses to the many challenges they face.

The objects of their ire take many forms, from authoritarianism and militarism to corruption and cronyism to external interference. These varied sources of discontent highlight the underlying absence of meaningful social contracts between states and citizens in most Middle Eastern countries, as well as the lack of a common understanding of the ingredients necessary to rejuvenate them.

Despair runs especially deep in the region's several collapsing states. A number of experts from Libya, Syria, and Yemen lament the difficulty in contemplating governance challenges where governance has effectively ceased to exist.

Prioritization of Local Concerns: Despite the region's many geopolitical challenges, the region-wide governance crisis is

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drawing the experts' focus inward to local matters. Media accounts of the Middle East, in Western and Arab press alike, focus on the region's acute crises, such as the military campaign against the self-proclaimed Islamic State, the conflict in Yemen, and the Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry. While no consensus arises from the experts on the underlying causes of turmoil in the region and in their countries, a striking prioritization of challenges closer to home emerges, on issues such as authoritarianism, corruption, and the lack of accountability. Five years after the Arab revolutions began, this is a potent reminder that the crisis of legitimacy facing Arab states remains a highly resonant issue.

Of course, for the experts in the region's most fragile states, where internal conflicts are transmuting into proxy conflicts, local governance challenges and geopolitical challenges become increasingly intertwined.

Democratic Prospects: The experts generally view democratic governance not as an end in itself but as an instrument for improving accountability and addressing corruption. Although they overwhelmingly support representative democracy, the experts tend to distinguish between democratic institutions and those bodies' more superficial trappings. They express considerable discontent with the lost opportunities resulting from governance failures, and they see direct linkages between the lack of political pluralism and the rise of extremist waves confronting the Middle East.

FINDINGS IN DEPTH
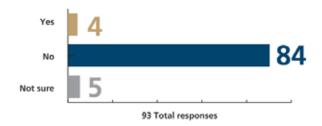### State-Citizen Relations
"There is no relationship at all."—Anonymous female

The Arab experts surveyed are almost unanimous in their extreme dissatisfaction with their governments. Experts were asked three questions about relations between governments and citizens in their countries. Although many of the experts have served, and some continue to serve, in senior government positions, only four of 93 respondents—from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)— express satisfaction with their governments (see responses to questions 7 and 8).[1] Libyan, Syrian, and Yemeni respondents are particularly blunt in describing the general collapse of state institutions and governing legitimacy.

In response to open-ended questions about the elements they would like to see in citizen-government relations and about the most important actions governments could take to improve governance, the experts have a similarly dim view of their governments (see questions 18 and 16).

QUESTIONS 7 AND 8
Are you satisfied with the relationship between the government and the citizens of your country? Why or why not?

Yes	4
No	84
Not sure	5

93 Total responses

Sample responses:
No. "What is there to be satisfied about?" —Egyptian male

No. "The relationship is based on fear and terror, and the implicit rejection of authority by the vast majority of citizens."—Syrian male

No. "My country, Libya, had almost ended, there is no real government in it, which makes answering this question difficult."—Anonymous Libyan

No. "In my country, Yemen, a quasi-legitimate exile government is unable to do the simplest of its tasks, and militias do not have the slightest sense of what they should do for the citizens."—Yemeni male

QUESTION 18
What elements would you like to see in any new relationship between the government and citizens in your country?

Sample responses:
"Accountability, of which there is currently none."
—Egyptian male

"To establish a new social contract based on building up the trust in all aspects."—Anonymous Algerian

"A relationship based on respect for human rights, rule of law and social justice."—Lebanese female

"Allowing for real alterations in power."—Moroccan male

What are the most important steps the government in your country could take to improve governance?

Sample responses:
"Transparency and accountability which can only be achieved through democratization and public participation in policy."—Bahraini male

"Prosecute corruption."—Anonymous

"Subjecting the military and security bodies to democratic oversight. Independence of religious institutions from the government."—Egyptian male

"Eliminate intelligence on citizens and corruption."
—Syrian female

The Role of Representative Democracy

"*Without democracy and with the rule of tyranny and authoritarianism, we will not achieve real stability*."—*Egyptian female*
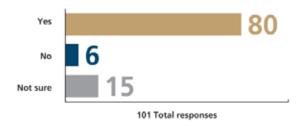
Consistent with Arab public opinion polling, the experts overwhelmingly support representative democracy, but not without reservations (see responses to questions 5, 6, and 11).[2] Experts were asked about the applicability of democracy to their countries. Only six of 101 experts—two from Yemen and one each from Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, and the UAE—believe that democracy is not suitable for their country. "This narrative of Arab exceptionalism is not only racist but factually wrong," says one Egyptian female.

However, Arab societies have a good deal of experience with authoritarian regimes that skillfully manipulate democratic trappings to create a thin veneer of legitimacy. Few experts speak of democracy in idealized tones. Significant numbers make clear that democratic governance is not an end in itself but rather a mechanism for improving accountability and addressing corruption.

Several experts express concerns about the risk of illiberal democracy, the challenge of protecting political or demographic minorities, and the tendency for authoritarian regimes to carefully stage-manage elections. A Moroccan male says he is unsure about the suitability of representative government for his country, because "majorities, even if democratically elected, that oppress minorities end up performing like tyrannies."

Do you think representative democracy is a suitable form of government for your country? Why or why not?

Yes	80
No	6
Not sure	15

101 Total responses

Sample responses:
Yes. "Autocratic regimes in the Arab world mastered the art of manipulating democratic 'procedures' to gain legitimacy."—Syrian male
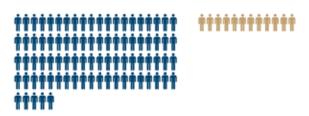
Yes. "Democracy is the least worst regime for the rule of societies, or as the Islamic fundamentalist expression goes 'democracy is the least damaging system to the rule of communities.'"—Egyptian male

No. "It [representative democracy] does not have a history in the political DNA of the region, it is not legitimate and has proven its failure over the past century."—Emirati male

Not sure. "Representative democracy, which offers everyone the right to do and say everything and elect anyone to power, may drive us to populist dictatorships and some form of anarchy. We need to rethink what kind of democracy we need, away from the all-ready western cut-and-paste concepts, and the outdated postcolonial authoritarianism."— Tunisian male

'Political pluralism' is a concept which values diversity in a society and which permits the peaceful coexistence of different interests, beliefs, and lifestyles. Which of the following statements comes closest to describing your views?

85 responses

"The lack of political pluralism in many Arab countries has contributed to the extremist wave confronting the Middle East today and urgently needs to be addressed."

12 responses

"Political pluralism is an important long-term goal for Arab countries, but pushing political reform too quickly could undermine security."

The Roots of Regional Turbulence

"Authoritarian political elites clinging determinedly to power, in the hopes of halting the democratic advances to which their people aspire."—Egyptian male
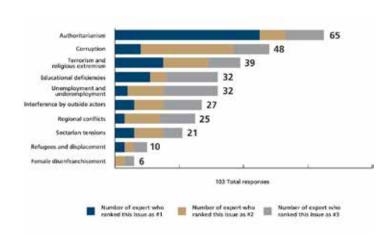
Though they differ on many details, the responses demonstrate a strong tendency to prioritize immediate local political and economic challenges over regional and geopolitical challenges. The experts were asked to reflect on the most pressing issues facing contemporary Arab societies, first in their own words and then by ranking a list of ten provided challenges.

In response to the open-ended question, experts cite broader categories of political and economic challenges at roughly twice the rate of ideological and security ones.[3] By contrast, regional issues receive relatively little attention—a handful of experts cite the Arab-Israeli conflict, but only one refers to Iran and one to the Islamic State as among the region's three biggest challenges.[4]

In response to the ranking question, authoritarianism and corruption emerge as the two challenges experts most frequently cite as their first, second, or third priorities (see responses to question 3).

Please rank the following issues in order of importance in the Middle East.

The Role of the Military

"Protect the country, don't destroy it. Protect the citizens, don't kill them."—Anonymous female

The experts want capable militaries to defend their nations' sovereignty, but most want this role limited to external defense (see responses to question 14). Nearly two-thirds explicitly oppose any governance role for militaries. Despite growing security threats, only about one in five participants advocate a direct military role either in providing internal stability or in protecting the domestic political system, for example, by ensuring constitutional order, promoting national unity, or defending democratic values.

What role, if any, should the military play in governance in your country?

Sample responses:

"A record of consistent and abject failure at all levels of governance, a history of military defeats, crippling levels of corruption, and sheer bloody minded brutality make them utterly unqualified and undeserving of any say in governance."—Egyptian male

"Safeguarding national sovereignty to protect the country against external threats. Protection of national security. The training of young generations on moral discipline and social behavior."—Jordanian female

Religion and Governance

"Religious practices and authority . . . should be relegated to private life." —Syrian male

The experts, possibly more inclined toward liberalism than the broader Arab population, tend to want a separation between religious and political institutions, though they express a variety of viewpoints (see responses to question 15). Nearly six in ten experts explicitly oppose a governance role for religious authorities, while about one-quarter advocate a limited advisory role, such as spiritual guidance and promoting tolerance. About one in ten advocate a limited governance role for religious authorities, such as legal interpretation, religious education, and family law administration. None of the experts advocates a direct role in strategic policymaking for religious authorities.

Religion is an important subtext for the survey responses, more broadly. For example, when asked to name the three biggest challenges in the Middle East, roughly half of the respondents make a direct or indirect reference to religion.[5] Although religious issues resonate less starkly in this survey than governance challenges and authoritarianism, the experts nonetheless demonstrate a strong desire for religious institutions to promote tolerance and pluralism and tend to view the mixing of religion and politics with great suspicion. At various points in the survey, experts refer to the need to reform religious institutions.

QUESTION 15
What role, if any, should religious authorities play in governance in your country?

Sample responses:
"Religious authorities should be confined to a social role."
—Bahraini male

"I disagree with the question because there are not, and there should not be, what are called religious authorities in the first place, but as for religious institutions and others such as Al-Azhar, their role should be completely separate from the state."—Egyptian male

"An advisory one, albeit one that is completely divorced from the executive. Religious institutions should not be funded by the state, nor should their officials be government appointees."—Egyptian male

"Stop its interference in political affairs."—Anonymous

The State of Education Systems

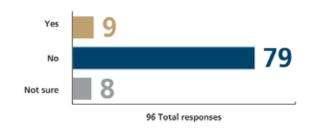*"Our education is basically a boot camp for extremist groups."*
—Jordanian female

The experts describe systemic failures in their countries' education systems, citing inadequate funding, curricula, and preparation for students for the modern workplace (see responses to questions 9 and 10).[6]

The Arab region's educational deficiencies have been well-documented by successive *Arab Human Development Reports* since 2002, and most experts appear to see educational deficiencies as integrally related to their country's governance challenges. A number of experts go so far as to argue that their country's education systems are deliberately designed to impede critical thinking and to foster ignorance. In answering this question and elsewhere in the survey, a number of experts cite educational deficiencies as facilitating radicalization.

QUESTIONS 9 AND 10
Are you satisfied with your country's education system? Why or why not?

Yes 9
No 79
Not sure 8

96 Total responses

Sample responses:
Yes. "It is comprehensive and accessible to the people."
—Omani male

No. "It is neither a 'system,' nor 'educational.'"
—Egyptian male

No. "Because the educational system is deliberately chosen by the state to maintain the current situation."—Moroccan male

No. "It has regressed significantly over the last 20 years." —Iraqi female

No. "Authoritarian regimes, as is the case in Egypt now, and the remaining Arab countries, do not allow putting in good education systems."—Egyptian female
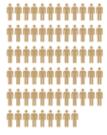
Economic Systems

"There won't be good economic opportunities for citizens without achieving the rule of law, which is the only guarantee to development."—Algerian male

On economic matters, too, the experts focus on governance and transparency. Their views on economics are diverse, with a majority favoring a mixed economic system with an important role reserved for government, over either a free market or a welfare economy (see responses to question 12). Although most of the experts lack formal economics training, there is a significant overlap of their views about economic and political governance. When asked how their governments could improve economic opportunities for their citizens, most experts refer not to technical fiscal, tax, or regulatory policy matters but to more fundamental issues of combating corruption, reducing cronyism, and promoting transparency. This suggests that, at least to these experts, the most pressing economic distinction for many countries may be not the particular forms their economic systems take but instead the capacity of those systems to adhere to international norms of transparency and the rule of law.

Which of the following statements comes closest to describing your views?

16 responses

"I support a free market system for my country, in which the private sector, rather than the government, plays the key role in job creation and technological innovation."

69 responses

"I support a mixed economic system for my country, with a strong private sector balanced with government interventions to ensure more fair distributions of wealth."

10 responses

"I support a welfare economy for my country, in which the government ensures economic justice for its people and plays an important role in job creation."
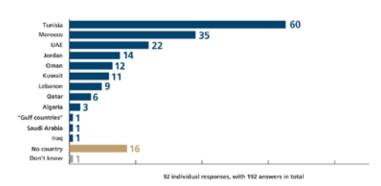
Model States in the Region

"Not sure they are successful, but they are on their way to develop systems that are promising in the future: Tunisia, Morocco."—Anonymous

Experts were asked to name the three Arab countries that best provide governance for their peoples. Nearly two in three cite Tunisia, which for all of its continuing challenges has emerged five years after its revolution as the most politically inclusive society in the Arab world. Morocco, which has more quietly undertaken gradual political reform, and the United Arab Emirates, which although lacking in political pluralism enjoys a strong reputation as a modern, global economic hub, also receive considerable support. Only one respondent cites Saudi Arabia and none names Egypt. Despite their traditional leadership roles in the region, both countries operate under politically exclusionist systems, which apparently hold little appeal. Nearly one in five experts believe that no Arab states have been successful, while many others offered their choices only begrudgingly (see responses to question 20).

QUESTION 20

Which three Arab countries enjoy the most successful forms of governance in the region, and why?

Tunisia — 60
Morocco — 35
UAE — 22
Jordan — 14
Oman — 12
Kuwait — 11
Lebanon — 9
Qatar — 6
Algeria — 3
"Gulf countries" — 1
Saudi Arabia — 1
Iraq — 1
No country — 16
Don't know — 1

92 individual responses, with 192 answers in total

The United States in the Middle East

"It [the United States] should either become a real partner to help the region develop or let the region find its own way."
—*Egyptian male*

Experts were asked to describe in their own words the role they would like the United States to play in the Middle East. They are conflicted, offering a broad range of responses, many of them rooted in deep skepticism of U.S. policies in the Middle East (see responses to question 22).[7]

Most responses can be loosely arranged into four broad categories. Roughly four in ten experts articulate some constructive role the United States could play in their region, particularly in the realm of supporting institutional reform, technical assistance, and education. About two in ten call upon the United States to cease interference, reduce its military role, or play no role whatsoever. Another two in ten focus on the Arab-Israeli conflict, calling on the United States to pressure Israel and/or support Palestinian statehood. This result, combined with the experts' infrequent citation of the Arab-Israeli conflict elsewhere in the survey, suggests that while most of them do not see the Arab-Israeli conflict as among the most urgent crises facing the region, it nonetheless remains a critical lens for evaluating U.S. policy. Lastly, about one in six want the United States to apply more pressure on Arab states, including four experts who advocate U.S. military action to remove President Bashar al-Assad in Syria.[8]

QUESTION 22

If the United States is to play a role in the Middle East, what role should it be?

Sample responses:

"Commit to democracy, stop political hypocrisy, and stop political and financial support for authoritarian regimes."
—Egyptian female

"The most important. [The United States] is refusing to engage positively in the region. It can encourage countries to introduce reforms. It can play a crucial role in the fight against terrorism."—Tunisian male

"Stop flattering oil states at the expense of values that call for representation."—Jordanian male

"The Arab region should rebalance its relationships in an increasingly multi-polar world, where the [United States] cannot/does not want to be global leader, despite the rhetoric of exceptionalism."—Syrian male

"Stay away from the region."—Omani male

"The United States has to start playing a more even-handed role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and limit its bias towards Israel."—Lebanese female

CONCLUSION

The findings of this survey of Arab experts constitute a rare, if not unique, compilation of the views of many of the Arab world's leading thinkers. Given the enormous challenges facing the Middle East, it is perhaps not surprising that the experts lack consensus on the root causes of the historic upheaval in the region. Nonetheless, their focus on authoritarianism, governance, and accountability, even in the face of acute terrorist threats and burgeoning regional conflicts, is an important reminder that the crisis of legitimacy facing Arab states remains highly resonant today. More than five years after the spark of revolution was lit in a small interior city in Tunisia, the dramatic and turbulent story of the Arab Awakening is far from over.

NOTES

1 Note that not every respondent answered every question. See the appendix for more information.

2 For example, the 2015 Arab Opinion Index found that 79 percent of respondents believed that democracy is the best form of government for their countries.

3 The five specific challenges most cited by experts were authoritarianism (23), education (23), sectarianism (17), extremism (16), and corruption (11), though the precise phrases the experts used varied.

4 A similar pattern was found in response to a question on the root causes of the instability: eight experts made mention of the Arab-Israeli conflict, three mentioned Saudi Arabia's role, two mentioned Iranian interference, and only one referred to the Islamic State.

5 These references include a broad variety of answers including sectarianism, religious extremism and terrorism, the role of religion in politics and public discourse, and the need for reform of Sunni religious institutions.

6 Nine respondents express satisfaction with their country's educational systems, including three from Lebanon, and one each from Egypt, Oman, Palestine, Tunisia, Turkey, and the UAE. However, the Egyptian response appears to be erroneous as that expert describes the link between authoritarian governance and poor educational systems.

7 The 2015 Arab Opinion Index found that 65 percent of Arabs surveyed viewed U.S. policy in the region negatively, compared to only 27 percent positively.

8 About ten responses did not fall neatly into one of these four broad categories.

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Methodology

This survey of Arab experts was conducted between October and December 2015 in English and Arabic. Although an effort was made to ensure geographic and demographic diversity, the experts were not randomly selected, and the results are not necessarily representative of the broader Arab public. One hundred five responses were received, including 97 submitted online through the SurveyMonkey website and eight received via e-mail. Sixty-four surveys were received in English and 41 in Arabic. Additionally, a small number of aborted and/or duplicate responses have been excluded from the survey. Quotes from the survey have been lightly edited for clarity.

Not every respondent answered every question. Survey analysis was conducted in English after the Arabic surveys were translated into English. Survey participants identified the following countries of origin: Egypt (20), Lebanon (11), Palestine (9), Libya (8), Bahrain (6), Algeria (5), Jordan (4), Syria (4), Yemen (4), Iraq (3), Morocco (3), Tunisia (3), Kuwait (1), Oman (1), Saudi Arabia (1), Turkey (1), and the UAE (1).[1] Two participants identified themselves as binationals, and eighteen declined to provide their countries of origin.

Trends in the Arab World Questionnaire

1. What are the three most important challenges facing contemporary Arab societies?

2. What, in your view, have been the root causes of the turbulence in the Middle East in recent years?

3. Please rank the following issues in order of importance (1 equals most important, 10 equals least important)
   - Sectarian tensions
   - Corruption
   - Educational deficiencies
   - Female disenfranchisement
   - Refugees and displacement
   - Authoritarianism
   - Regional conflicts
   - Interference by outside actors
   - Terrorism and religious extremism
   - Unemployment and underemployment

4. What do you see as the most important factors leading to Arab youth to join ISIL [the self-proclaimed Islamic State] and other extremist groups?

5. Do you think representative democracy is a suitable form of government for your country?
   - Yes   • No   • Not Sure

6. Why or why not?

7. Are you satisfied with the relationship between the government and the citizens of your country?
   - Yes   • No   • Not Sure

8. Why or why not?

9. Are you satisfied with your country's education system?
   - Yes   • No   • Not Sure

10. Why or why not?

11. "Political pluralism" is a concept which values diversity in a society and which permits the peaceful coexistence of different interests, beliefs, and lifestyles. Which of the following statements comes closest to describing your views?
a. "The lack of political pluralism in many Arab countries has contributed to the extremist wave confronting the Middle East today and urgently needs to be addressed."

b. "Political pluralism is an important long-term goal for Arab countries, but pushing political reform too quickly could undermine security."

12. Which of the following statements comes closest to describing your views?
a. "I support a free market system for my country, in which the private sector, rather than the government, plays the key role in job creation and technological innovation."

b. "I support a mixed economic system for my country, with a strong private sector balanced with government interventions to ensure more fair distributions of wealth."

c. "I support a welfare economy for my country, in which the government ensures economic justice for its people and plays an important role in job creation."

13. Which of the following statements comes closest to describing your views?
a. "Freedom of expression is a fundamental human right, and citizens should be given almost absolute freedom to express themselves."

b. "Freedom of expression is an important human right, but certain restrictions are appropriate to promote social cohesion."

c. "Freedom of expression is desirable, but in light of the grave threat posed by extremism, it is appropriate that certain forms of expression be censored."

14. What role, if any, should the military play in governance in your country?

15. What role, if any, should religious authorities play in governance in your country?

16. What are the most important steps the government in your country could take to improve governance?

17. What are the most important steps the government in your country could take to improve the economic opportunities of its citizens?

18. What elements would you like to see in any new relationship between the government and citizens in your country?

19. How will the demographic changes caused by the Middle East refugee crises affect the region in the decade to come?

20. Which three Arab countries enjoy the most successful forms of governance in the region, and why?

21. What role, if any, should non-Arab countries play in helping to stabilize the Middle East?

22. If the United States is to play a role in the Middle East, what role should it be?

The following two questions are for demographic purposes only and will remain private.

23. What is your gender?
- Male
- Female
- Prefer not to answer

24. What is your country of origin?

Do you give the Carnegie Endowment permission to list your name as a participant in this survey?
- Yes
- No

If so, please include your name below:

NOTES

1 Approximately 20 Saudis were invited to participate. Given Saudi Arabia's important regional role, it is unfortunate that only one individual chose to participate. This is the lowest response rate, by a significant measure, of any of the countries represented in the survey.