



الباروميتر العربي  
ARAB BAROMETER

# Democracy in the Middle East & North Africa

July 2022



Michael Robbins  
Princeton University

## Executive Summary

Citizens across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are growing increasingly concerned about the potential problems associated with a democratic political system. Over the last decade, but particularly within the last five years, there has been a dramatic increase in the degree to which the region's citizens believe democracies are bad for economic performance, stability, and decisiveness. In some countries, the degree to which concern about these potential problems has increased is especially dramatic. For example, Tunisians and Iraqis are now nearly 50 points more likely to say that democracy has some of these limitations than they were just a decade ago.

Ultimately, citizens across MENA seek solutions to major problems in their lives. These include but are not limited to stagnant economies, high unemployment rates, rising cost of living, and, in some countries, internal instability. Until recently, many appeared to believe that democracy was a system that could solve such challenges. Over the last 75 years, democracies have tended to be wealthier, more politically stable, less corrupt, and more efficient at meeting the basic needs of citizens than authoritarian alternatives.<sup>1</sup> In recent years, however, many non-democratic systems may appear more attractive, including the Chinese system that has led to rapid economic growth over the last 40 years. In this new global environment, many in MENA appear uncertain if democracy can effectively deliver solutions to their country's problems.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, looking at the experience of MENA countries over the last decade, it is perhaps not surprising that the region's citizens have increasing doubts about the benefits of democracy. Tunisia, Lebanon, and Iraq are the countries across the region where elections have been the most meaningful over the past decade, with each having experienced a change in government based on results at the ballot box. Yet, their collective experience clearly demonstrates that democracy has not been a panacea for their respective challenges. Tunisia's GDP per capita is now lower than it was in 2011, Lebanon has faced financial collapse, and Iraq suffered significant internal instability.

Yet, despite growing concerns about the effectiveness of democracy, citizens in MENA have not completely given up on this political system. Substantial majorities still believe that regardless of its shortcomings, democracy remains the best system. Demonstrating an even deeper commitment to democracy, majorities also affirm that it is the only viable political system in nearly all the countries surveyed. In other words, citizens across MENA realize that democracy may not

---

<sup>1</sup>See Olson, Mancur. 1993. "Dictatorship, Democracy, and Development." *American Political Science Review* 87:3, p. 576-576.

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

be perfect, but a clear majority still say it is preferable to a non-democratic system.

It is also noteworthy that despite growing concerns about the effectiveness of this system, in most countries the perception that democracy is the best system or that it is the only viable system has not changed dramatically over the past decade. In the majority of countries surveyed, overall support for democracy has declined only slightly or not at all, while in some countries citizens are now more likely to say that democracy is always preferable over other systems than they were in previous years.

Additionally, although those who have higher levels of education tend to be more supportive of democracy, there are not substantial differences by age, gender, or income, meaning there tends to be relatively broad support for democracy as the most preferred system across many segments of society.

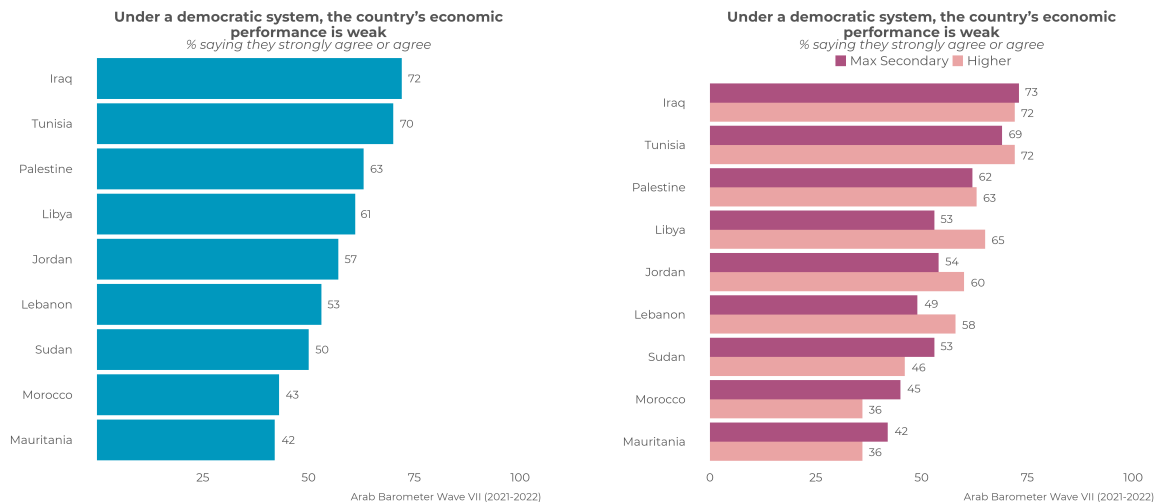
These are among the main findings of ten nationally representative public opinion surveys conducted across the Middle East and North Africa from 2021-22 as part of Arab Barometer's Wave VII. The results include nearly 23,000 interviews across the region and have a margin of error of approximately  $\pm 2$  points in each country. Overall, these results make clear that while citizens across the region have come to realize democracy does not represent a panacea for all their country's problems, they remain most supportive of it compared with other political systems.

## Concerns about Democracy

Today, citizens across the region harbor significant reservations about democracy as a system of governance. Since its inception in 2006, Arab Barometer has asked questions about the degree to which people in MENA believe some of the problems that critics of democracy commonly assert are true or not. These relate to the degree to which economic performance is weak under a democratic system, democracy is indecisive and full of quibbling, and democracy is ineffective at maintaining stability.

In seven of the nine countries surveyed in Arab Barometer's Wave VII that included these questions, half or more agree or strongly agree that economic performance is poor under a democratic system. This view is most widely held in Iraq (72 percent) and Tunisia (70 percent), which are two of the countries in the region where elections have been the most meaningful over the last decade. Meanwhile, this view is also widely held in Palestine (63 percent) and Libya (61 percent). The two countries where fewer than half hold this view are Morocco (43 percent) and Mauritania (42 percent), although this perception is

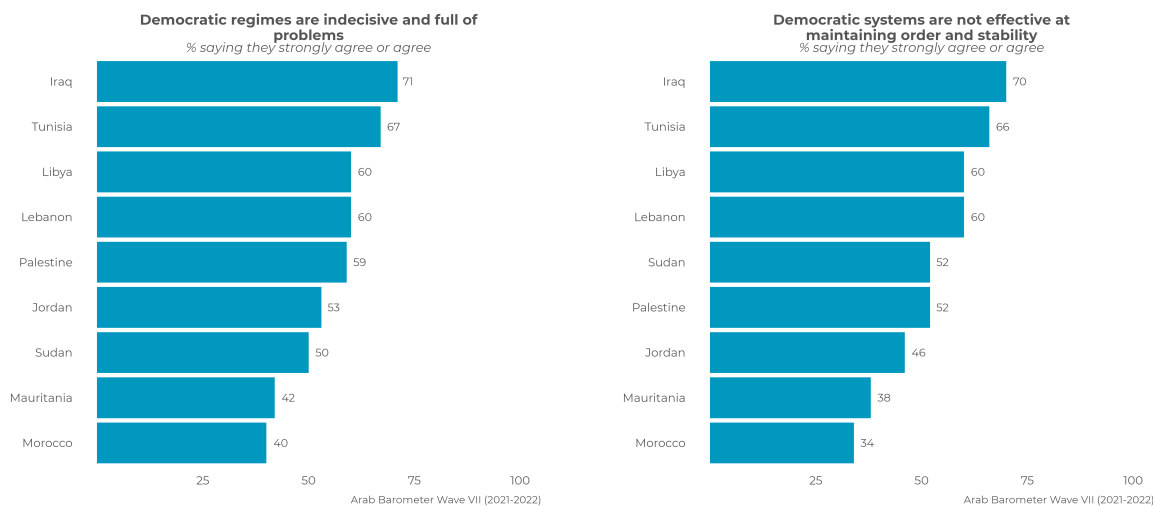
fairly widespread with more than four-in-ten agreeing with this statement in both countries.



Notably, this view is held nearly equally by those who are younger and older, male and female, and wealthier and poorer in almost all countries surveyed. In some countries, there is a moderate difference by level of education. However, often it is the case that those who have a college degree or above are more likely to say the economy performs poorly under democracy compared with those who have a secondary degree or less. In Libya, those who have a college degree are 12 points more likely to hold this view than those without one. Similar gaps exist in Lebanon (+9 points) and Jordan (+6 points). However, this difference does not hold across all countries. In Morocco (-9 points) and Mauritania (-6 points), those who have a college degree more are less likely to hold this view.

Results are similar for the perception that democratic regimes are indecisive with half or more holding this view in seven of nine countries surveyed. At least two-thirds agree with this statement in Iraq (71 percent) and Tunisia (67 percent), while about six-in-ten agree in Libya (60 percent), Lebanon (60 percent), and Palestine (59 percent). Again, only in Mauritania (42 percent) and Morocco (40 percent) do fewer than half believe democracies suffer from this shortcoming.

Again, relatively few substantive differences exist across demographic categories, meaning citizens of nearly all backgrounds are about equally likely to hold this view.



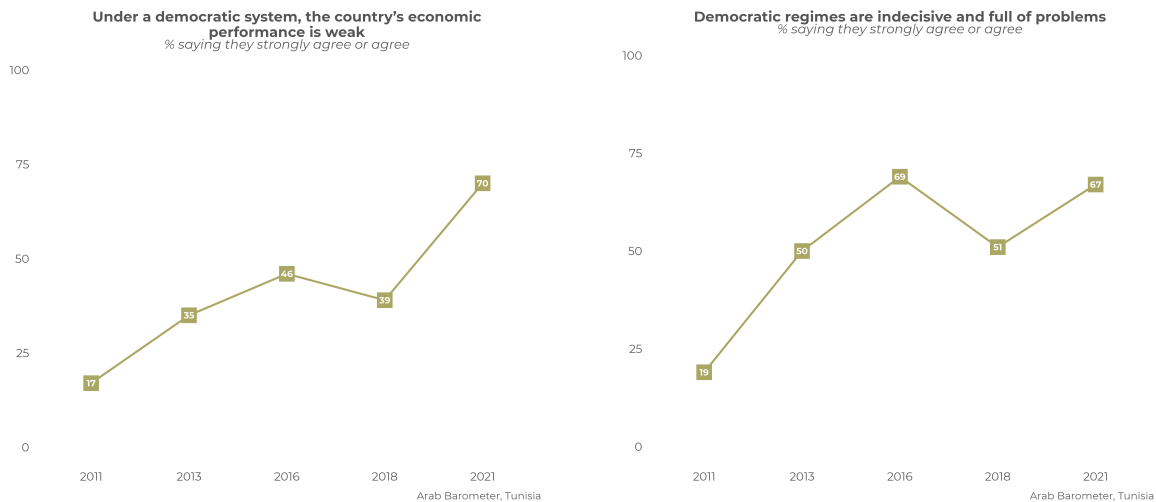
The perception that democracies are not effective at maintaining order and stability is also widely shared across MENA countries with majorities in six of the nine countries surveyed holding this view. As with other concerns, Iraq (70 per cent) and Tunisia (66 per cent) stand apart from the others. However, six-in-ten in Libya and Lebanon share this view as do about half in Sudan and Palestine (52 per cent, respectively). Meanwhile, fewer than half hold this view in Jordan (46 per cent), Mauritania (38 per cent), and Morocco (34 per cent). As with other concerns about democracy, this perception is held about equally across major demographic segments of society.

## Increasing Concerns about Democracy

Citizens across MENA have become increasingly concerned about the potential problems associated with democratic governance over the last decade. At the time of the Arab Uprisings of 2011, relatively few believed that democracy was associated with challenges such as weak economic performance, indecision, or problems with maintaining stability. For example, in no country surveyed in Arab Barometer’s second wave (2010-2011) did more than half of citizens say economic performance was weak in a democracy. The same is true when respondents were asked if democracy leads to instability or democracies are indecisive, with fewer than half holding these views in all countries surveyed.

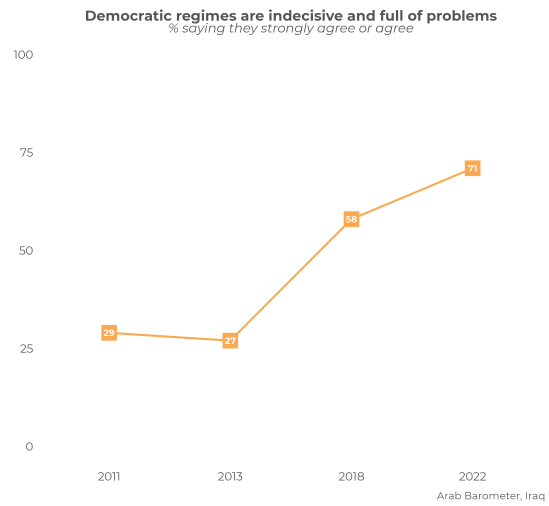
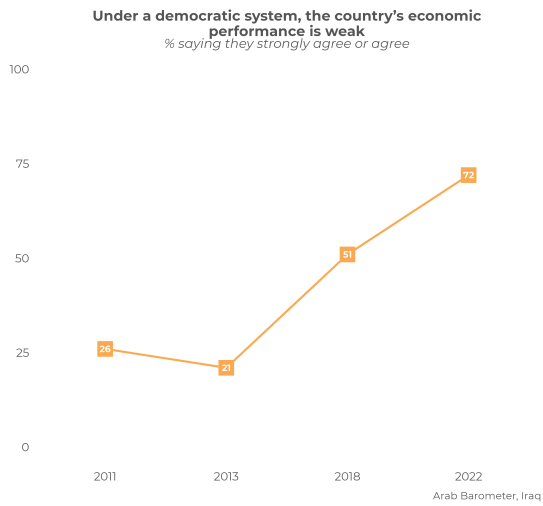
In most countries, these views held relatively stable over most of the decade that followed. The key exceptions are some of the countries that were more democratic, or at least experienced more meaningful elections during that time. In Tunisia, the country that had the deepest experiment with democracy during the 2010s, concern about democracy steadily increased over much of the

decade. For example, in 2011 just 17 percent of citizens said economic performance was weak under democracy, which rose to 70 percent by 2021. Similarly, the perception that democracy is indecisive rose from only 19 percent to 67 percent during the same period, while concerns about the ability of a democracy to maintain order rose from 17 percent to 66 percent during this time.

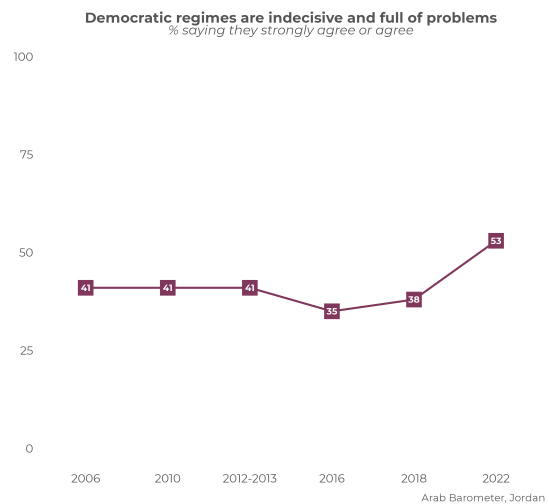
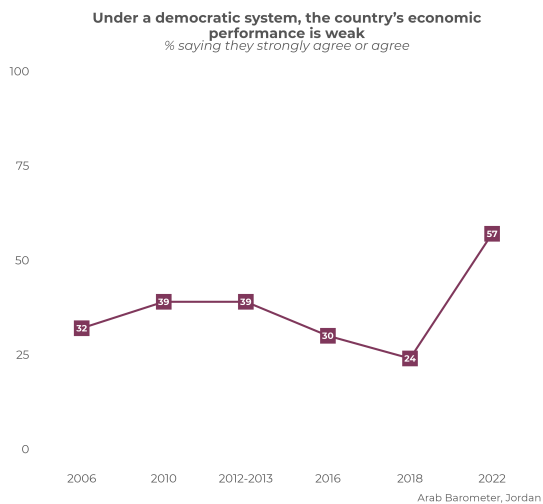


A similar pattern exists in Iraq, where concerns about democracy have also increased dramatically over the past decade. In 2011, only a quarter of Iraqis (26 percent) believed that economic performance is weak under a democratic system. By 2022, nearly three-quarters (72 percent) said the same, an increase of 46 points. The trend is similar for the perception that democracy is indecisive, exhibiting an increase in the percent who agree from 29 percent in 2011 to 71 percent in 2022 (+42 points). The same holds true for the perception that democracy is ineffective at maintaining stability, which increased from 23 percent in 2011 to 70 percent in 2022 (+47 points). These results make clear that in two countries that have experienced changes in government as a result of elections over the past decade, perceptions about the limitations of democracy have increased dramatically.

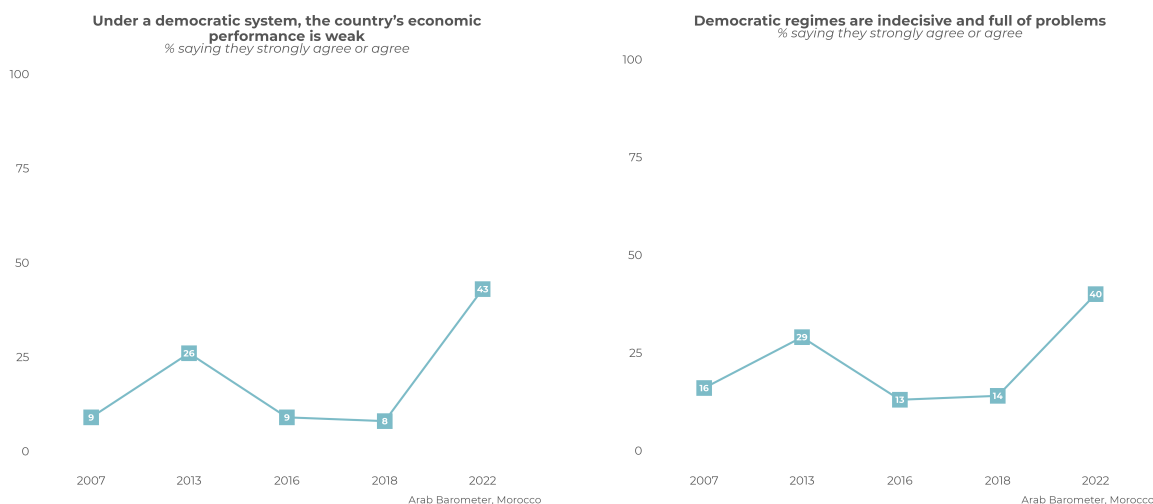
## Arab Barometer – Wave VII Democracy



Yet, concern about democracy is no longer limited to the countries that have deeper experiences with democracy in the MENA region. Instead, concern has increased in most countries, particularly in the last half of a decade. In Jordan between 2006 and 2018, the perception that democracy is associated with weak economic performance varied between 39 percent (2010) and 24 percent (2018). However, this concern exhibited a dramatic increase of 33 points since 2018, rising from 24 percent to 57 percent. The same pattern holds for the perception that democracy is indecisive, with a 15-point increase since 2018 and democracy is not effective at maintaining stability, which increased by 16 points over the same period.



However, the country that has exhibited the most dramatic increase in concern about democracy since 2018 is Morocco. In 2018, just eight percent of those in Morocco said that economic performance was weak in a democracy, which has risen to 43 percent in 2022 (+35 points). Major increases are also observed for democracy is indecisive (+26 points) and democracy is ineffective at maintaining order (+25 points) over the same period.



This trend of increasing concern about the problems associated with democracy extends to all eight countries for which Arab Barometer has conducted surveys in both its 2018-2019 wave and its 2021-2022 wave. These regional results strongly imply that perceptions about the benefits associated with democracy have declined across MENA in recent years. No longer is democracy viewed as a panacea to solve political and economic challenges. Citizens recognize that even with a democratic system, problems are likely to endure. This growing suspicion about the benefits of democracy is in line with the broader global trend of democratic recession, particularly in light of global economic and political challenges to democratic systems.<sup>3</sup> These findings from Arab Barometer make clear that the region has not been immune from this broader trend.

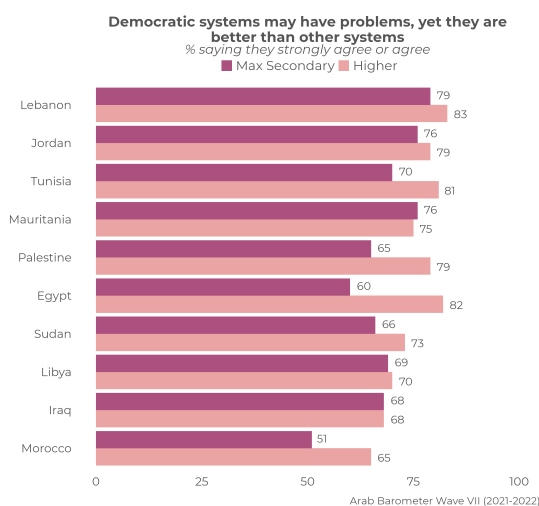
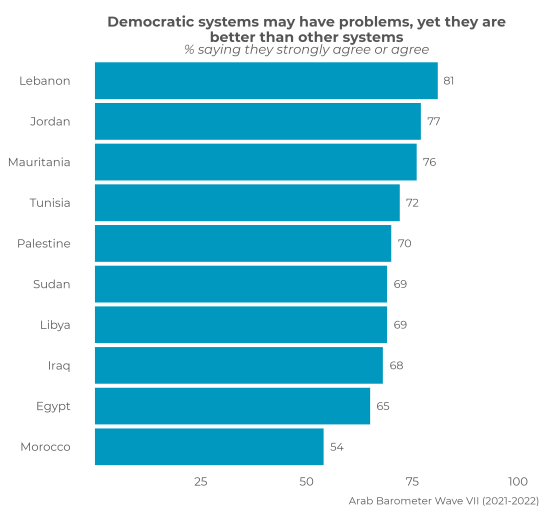
## Support for Democracy

Yet, despite increasing concerns about democracy, citizens across MENA largely affirm that regardless of these issues democracy remains the best system of

<sup>3</sup>See Diamond, Larry. 2020. "Democratic regression in comparative perspective: scope, methods, and causes." *Democratization* 28:1, p. 22-44.



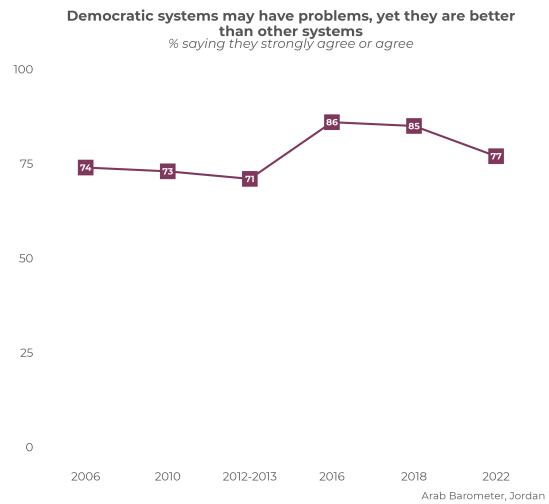
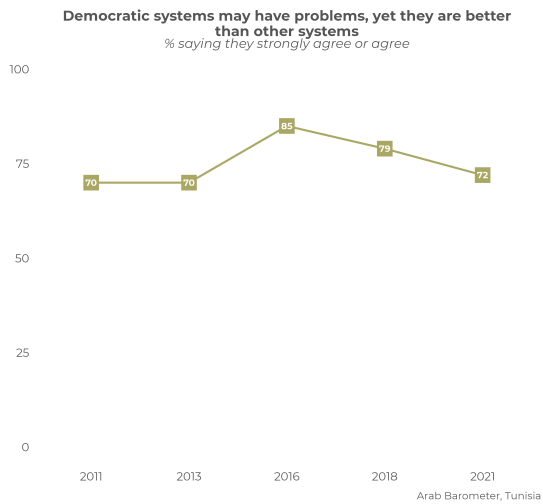
governance for their society. Majorities in all ten countries surveyed hold this view, including at least three quarters in Lebanon (81 percent), Jordan (77 percent), and Mauritania (76 percent). Elsewhere, roughly two-thirds or more hold this view in all countries except Morocco, where only 54 percent agree that despite its problems, democracy remains the best system of governance.



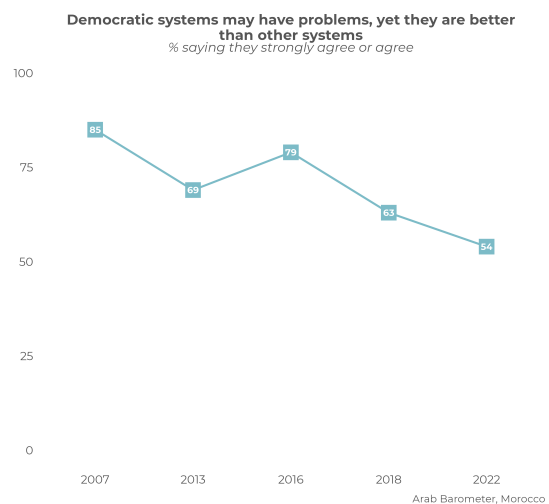
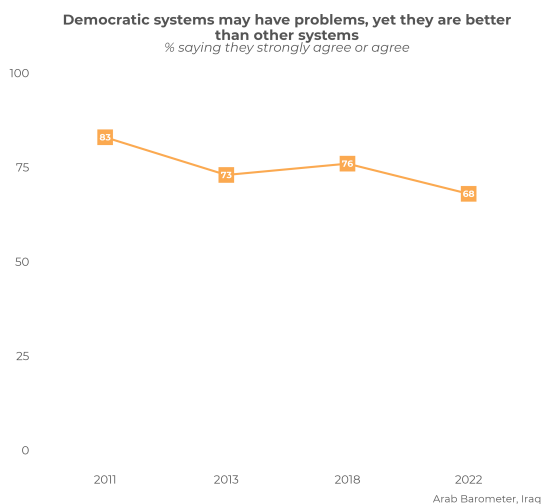
Support for democracy as the best political system tends to be higher among those with a college degree or above compared with those who have a secondary degree or less. Gaps are particularly large in Egypt (+22 points), Palestine (+14 points), Morocco (+14 points), and Tunisia (+11 points). Additionally, support tends to be somewhat higher among youth ages 18-29 compared with those who are 30 and older. For example, youth are more likely to say democracy is the best system by 13 points in Morocco, seven points in Sudan, six points in Jordan, and five points in Lebanon.

Despite growing concerns across MENA about the potential problems associated with democracy, in most countries the percentage saying democracy remains the best system of governance has not declined to a large extent. In Tunisia, approximately the same percentage of citizens say democracy is the best system now compared with in 2011 (+2 points). Similarly, in Jordan, there has also not been a decline in this perception, with citizens being 3 points more likely to say democracy is the best system in 2022 compared with 2006 (77 percent vs. 74 percent).

## Arab Barometer – Wave VII Democracy



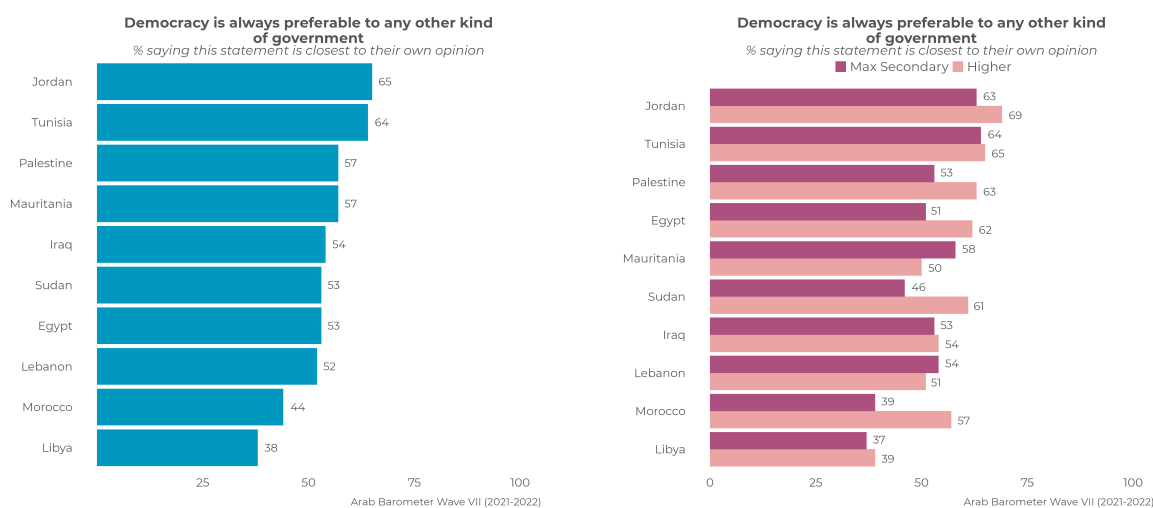
Elsewhere, there have been declines in support for democracy as the best political system. In Iraq, support has fallen by 15 points from 83 percent in 2011 to 68 percent in 2022. Morocco represents the most notable exception, however. In 2007, 85 percent of Moroccans affirmed that democracy was the best political system. In 2022, just 54 percent say the same, representing a decline of 31 points.



A stronger measure of support for democracy is not whether people think it is the best system, but whether they consider it to be the only viable system of

governance. Arab Barometer includes a question about whether democracy is always preferable, sometimes a non-democratic government is preferable, or if the type of government doesn't really matter.

Unsurprisingly, fewer in MENA countries say democracy is always preferable than agree with the statement it is the best system overall. However, majorities still say democracy is always preferable in eight of the 10 countries surveyed. This view is most prevalent in Jordan (65 percent), Tunisia (64 percent), Palestine (57 percent), and Mauritania (57 percent), while about half say the same in Sudan (53 percent), Egypt (53 percent), and Lebanon (52 percent). Only in Morocco (44 percent) and Libya (38 percent) do fewer than half say democracy is always preferable.

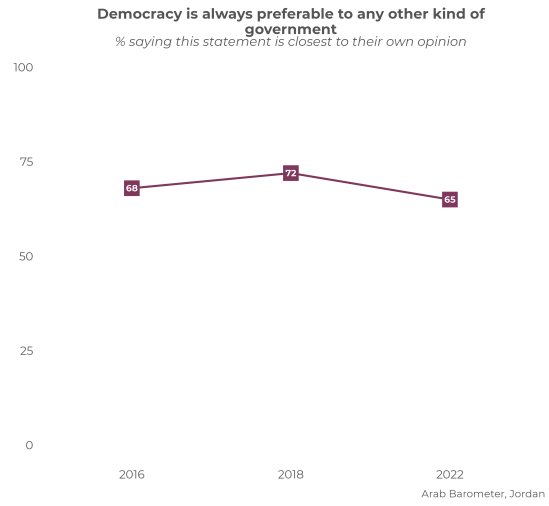
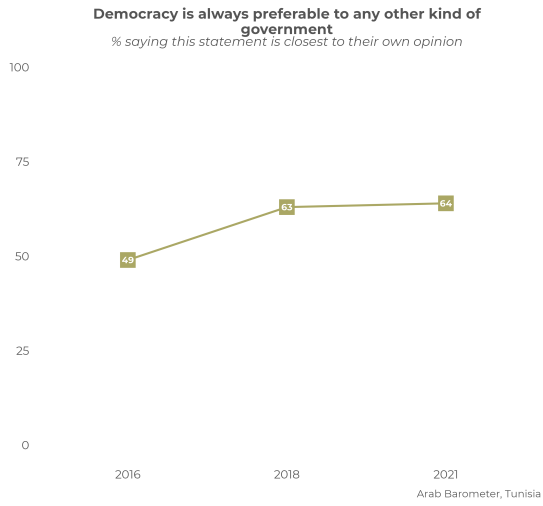


Those with a university degree or above tend to be more likely to say democracy is always preferable compared to those with a secondary degree or less. The gaps are largest in Morocco (18 points), Sudan (15 points), Egypt (11 points), Palestine (10 points), and Jordan (6 points). Combined, this result suggests that societal elites, at least measured by level of education, tend to be more committed to democracy as a political system.

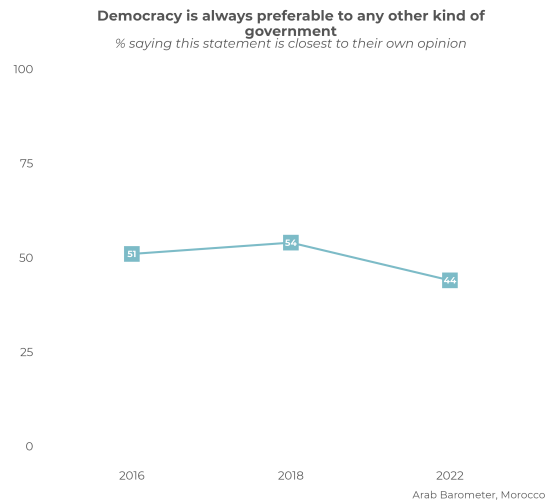
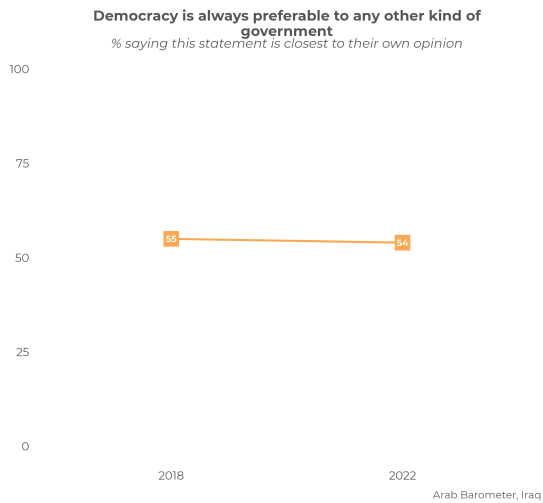
The sense that democracy is the only viable system does not follow a uniform trend over time across the region. In Tunisia, the perception that democracy is the only viable system has actually increased by 15 points from 2016 to 2021, the first year Arab Barometer included this question. Meanwhile, in Jordan, there has not been a meaningful change over a similar period of time, falling by three points from 68 percent to 65 percent.

# Arab Barometer – Wave VII

## Democracy



In Iraq, there has been effectively no change in this perception, with 55 percent saying democracy is always preferable in 2018 compared with 54 percent in 2022. Again, Morocco stands out from the other countries with a moderate decline of seven points, falling from 51 percent in 2016 to 44 percent in 2022.



## Conclusions

On the face of it, views of democracy across MENA may appear contradictory. The rise in concerns about the performance of democracy on key issues such as the economy, stability, and ability to make decisive change highlights important limitations of this system. Countries in MENA where elections have been more meaningful over the last decade have not necessarily given democracy a good name. In Tunisia, GDP per capita is now lower than at the time of the revolution. In Lebanon, the 2019 economic collapse has led to a massive increase in the rate of poverty. The government also failed to prevent the devastating port explosion in Beirut in August 2020. In Iraq, weak governance and disunity led to the Islamic State overtaking vast parts of the country.

Looking outside the region, democracy has also been in crisis. Populist leaders have risen up in a number of democracies, often undermining democratic institutions. The U.S. Capitol riot struck at the heart of one of the world's longest-standing and most powerful democracies, suggesting democracies may not be able to maintain order. In short, both in the region and around the world, democracy appears to be losing some of its luster.

It follows that citizens across MENA no longer perceive democracy to be a panacea that can solve all of their political and economic problems. In many ways, this view may be more realistic. On average, democracy has a number of advantages over other forms of government. Perhaps most importantly, it provides greater accountability for leaders who can be removed from office through a peaceful and regular process. Yet, this alone does not guarantee that leaders will be able to successfully address complex economic, political, and social challenges.

Yet, despite their increasing concern that a democratic system has a number of important weaknesses, support for democracy remains resilient across MENA. These survey results make clear that despite growing concerns, citizens across the region are not yet giving up complete hope in democracy. In most countries surveyed, clear majorities still believe that even though it is imperfect, democracy remains the best system of governance. This percentage has fallen in some countries over the last decade, but remains the view of at least two-thirds of citizens in nearly all countries surveyed.

Meanwhile, at least half say that democracy is the only viable system in the majority of countries, implying they will not willingly accept alternatives to this system. This view has also remained stable in recent years in most countries.

Overall, this does not suggest the future for democratic governance, at least in the near term, is favorable for MENA. Many actors in the region and beyond

have worked to undermine the countries that sought political transitions after the Arab Uprisings of 2011. These vested interests continue to seek to prevent democracy taking root in the region. Citizens would need to take significant actions in an attempt to overcome these barriers. But, despite this limited hope, it is clear that citizens across MENA still harbor democratic aspirations. In their view, democracy may not be perfect, but on the whole it still remains the preferable system given the existing alternatives.



## 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.



[ARABBAROMETER.ORG](http://ARABBAROMETER.ORG)



[ARABBAROMETER](https://www.facebook.com/ARABBAROMETER)



[@ARABBAROMETER](https://twitter.com/ARABBAROMETER)