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ARAB CENTER FOR RESEARCH & POLICY STUDIES

Jordanian Public Perceptions of the Syrian Crisis

Arab Public Opinion Index

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Arab Public Opinion Index | September 2012

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Field work for the Jordanian section of the 2012 Arab Public Opinion Index, an annual survey carried out by the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies (ACRPS) in Doha, Qatar, was completed between July 5 and July 11, 2012. The annual survey, which last year was conducted in 12 Arab countries, aims to highlight trends in Arab public opinion toward a wide number of economic, social and political matters, including public attitudes toward democracy, political and civic participation, and the Arab public's attitude toward their countries' state institutions. With field work in the remaining Arab countries due to be carried out in the following weeks, the ACRPS expects to make a comprehensive report of the wider survey available in February 2013.

For this year, in addition to the general questions described above, respondents were also asked about their attitudes to the crisis* in Syria. This serves the ACRPS' aims of better understanding how Arab citizens view and relate to contemporaneous issues unraveling in the Arab countries. Here, the progress of events in Syria—just as was the case with last year's revolutions—and their implications are among the concerns of Arab citizens, across all social strata and political and intellectual leanings. The events in Syria have been prominent in discussions within the Arab public sphere, receiving a great deal of attention from both political actors and scholars in the Arab countries. Given the widespread impact of the crisis on the Arab public and the importance of its potential influence in the country and the Arab region, particularly the Arab Levant, the ACRPS chose to add a number of questions focused specifically on Syria to this year's survey. This report will present the attitudes of Jordanian respondents toward the Syrian crisis from three perspectives:

- 1) Support for and opposition to the departure of Bashar al Assad;
- 2) Jordanian citizens' opinion on the "ideal solution" to the Syrian crisis; and
- 3) Jordanian citizens' description (perception) of the events in Syria.

The results presented below come from our representative sample of the Jordanian population, composed of 1,883 randomly selected respondents, using a multi-staged clustered approach that accounted for the full diversity of the Jordanian population, including distribution in urban versus rural areas, as well as distribution across the major Jordanian administrative divisions and gender differences.

* The Arabic phrase used in the survey was *azma*, which translates as "crisis". This was done to achieve a level of objectivity in the survey: to use the expression *thawra* or revolution would have loaded the wording of the question, jeopardizing the quality of the survey.

The design of this survey, which was completed through face-to-face interviews by the field workers, will allow for an accurate portrayal of the entire Jordanian population. In addition, the design allows the ACRPS to analyze respondents' views based on the Governorates of Jordan in which they live, as well as a highly reliable portrayal of Jordanian society, with a margin of error of $\pm 2.5\%$.

The ACRPS also wishes to take this opportunity to thank the Amman-based Center for Strategic Studies for the role their team played in carrying out the field work, and to the Jordanian respondents for agreeing to give so generously of their time to make this survey possible.

The Resignation of Bashar al-Assad

Beginning with the outbreak of public protests in Syria during March 2011, public discussion was increasingly focused on the possibility of the stepping down of Bashar al-Assad as a possible resolution to the crisis, which would allow for the peaceful transition of the country to a new political system. With this in mind, Jordanian respondents were asked to respond to the statement "Would it be better for Syria today if Bashar al-Assad were to step down from power"? A majority of respondents, 79%, expressed support for this statement, with only 11% of them opposed, providing evidence for overwhelming Jordanian support for the resignation of al-Assad. Nine percent of respondents expressed no preference ("no opinion") on the issue, and 1% refused to provide an answer. Additionally, respondents were asked to identify which of the scenarios would be "best for Syria" in the actual questions; what a close examination of the results also shows is that many of those who responded negatively to the statement did not do so out of support for Syria's current president, but out of fear that his resignation could bring the country into a new and as-yet unknown phase of history.

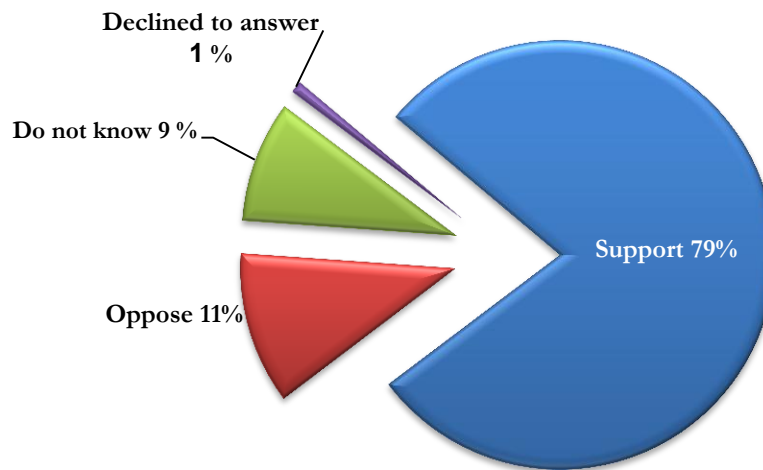


Figure 1: Jordanian respondents' support and opposition for Bashar al-Assad's stepping down

An analysis of the respondents' views according to the Governorates of the Kingdom in which they live and various demographic factors shows no significant, meaningful differences in outlook on the question of the departure of Bashar al-Assad. The Jordanian majority in support of his ouster is held across all areas within the country. The Jordanian public's support for the resignation, or otherwise, of al-Assad, does not change with gender or with educational levels, with responses being nearly constant and homogeneous with regards to these factors. Additionally, Jordanians' attitudes toward the stepping down of al-Assad remains the same with respondents' age group.

The Ideal Solution to the Syrian Crisis

In an effort to understand trends within Jordanian public opinion better and more deeply, respondents were also asked the following open ended question: "In your opinion, what is the ideal solution to the Syrian crisis?". By collating the 1,882 responses received, responses were grouped into three categories:

- 1) Those who believe that an ideal solution could be achieved by "changing the Syrian political regime";
- 2) Those who believe that an ideal solution could be achieved by "bringing the revolution to an end"; and

3) Those who believe that an ideal solution could be achieved by the “regime initiating meaningful political reforms and engaging in a dialogue with both the opposition and the Syrian people in general”.

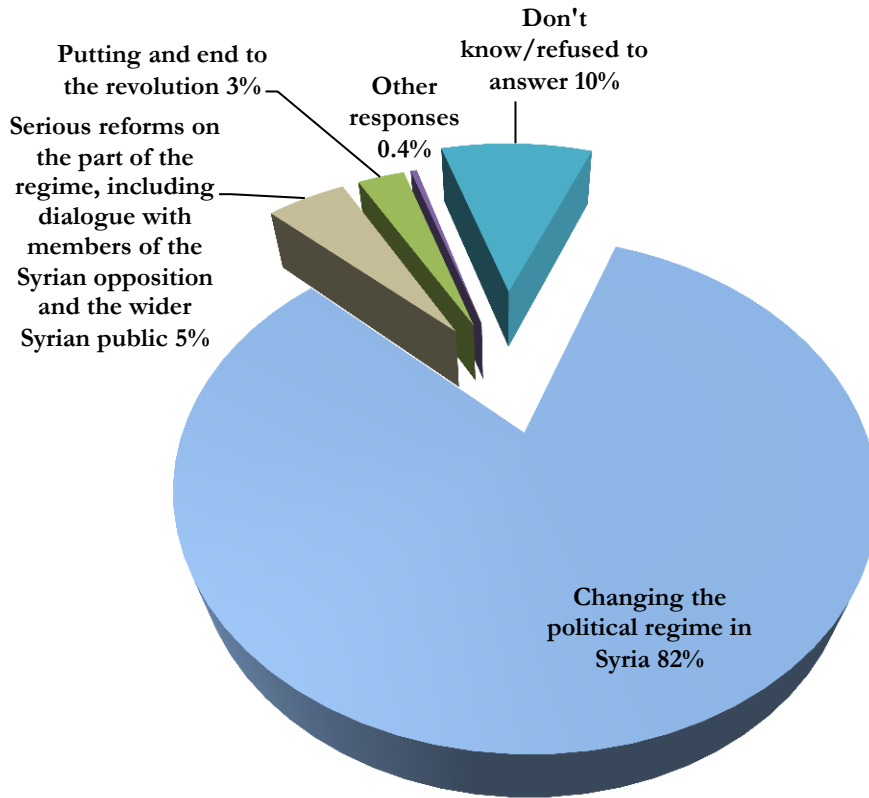


Figure 1: Trends in Jordanian public opinion – an ideal solution to the Syrian crisis

The vast majority of Jordanian responses, at 82%, formed a part of the first category, those who viewed a radical change of the ruling regime in Syria in order for the ideal solution to be arrived at. In other words, a clear majority of Jordanians believe that the best possible solution to the Syrian crisis entails fundamentally changing the political structure of the country. Within this group, roughly 80% (or 66% of the total respondents) expressed the view that the ideal solution and the change to the regime would be achieved through the stepping down of Bashar al-Assad. A further 7% of the total respondents expressed the view that the ideal solution to the Syrian crisis would be achieved simply through the downfall of the al-Assad regime by any means possible.

Finally, 4% of the total respondents insisted not only on al-Assad's departure, but also that he should be brought to trial for crimes committed during his handling of the revolution or in his rule overall.

Also contained within this category of responses to the open-ended question were those who called for the intervention of Arab powers in Syria to assist the Syrian people put an end to the crisis, accounting for a total of 3% of the responses. Notably, support for the intervention on the part of the "Great Powers" in the Syrian crisis accounted for only 0.4% of the responses to this question. In conclusion, this is a portion of Jordanian public opinion that, through its opposition to the present Syrian regime, stands in support of the Syrian revolution.

The second group of responses to this question, accounting for roughly 3% of Jordanian public opinion, reflected the views of those who believed that the ideal solution would be arrived at through putting an end to the revolution. Within this group were the 2% of respondents (roughly 66 % of those within this sub-group, but a proportion close to the margin of error of this survey) whose responses included statements about the need to eliminate the revolution, opposition groups, and armed militia. Other respondents whose responses were included in this same category also called for an end to the intervention of regional and global powers (e.g., the Gulf states, Turkey, the United States, and Arab countries neighboring Syria), which comprised another 1% of the total responses to this question. This later group regards such intervention as bringing support to the opposition against the Syrian regime. Given that this category of responses in totality represents only 3% of Jordanian responses – a figure very close to the margin of error reported here – one can conclude that only a relatively insignificant proportion of the Jordanian people are opposed to the Syrian revolution and support the regime.

There is a third and final category of responses to this same question made up of those whose answers suggest that an ideal solution to the Syrian crisis would begin with the regime undertaking fundamental reforms, and initiating a dialogue with the Syrian people in general and the opposition in particular. Taken together, this group represents 5% of responses of Jordanian public opinion. Responses that were grouped within this category included those in which the respondents voiced the opinion that the Syrian regime should instigate political reforms guaranteeing political participation by all sections of Syrian society; it also included those who called for free and fair elections open to participation by all. Responses in this category also called for a serious dialogue

between the political leadership of the Syrian regime, on the one hand, and the forces within the Syrian opposition, on the other.

Respondents whose views to the open-ended question were grouped in this category also expressed the view that the regime, in addition to undertaking serious and fundamental reforms, should work to bring a number of the present regime’s officials to face justice and be brought to trial for the actions they have committed during the present crisis. Finally, respondents whose answers were placed in this category tended to express the view that external powers – the West, Russia, Turkey, or Iran – should refrain from supporting either side of the crisis, be it the opposition or the regime. In conclusion, those whose written responses were placed in this category support a serious reform process initiated by the regime, provided that the reforms are demonstrably genuine.

It should be mentioned here, finally, that 10% of the Jordanian respondents did not provide an answer to this question on what they felt would be an ideal solution to the Syrian crisis.

Table 1: A breakdown of Jordanians' feelings about what an "Ideal Solution" to the Syrian Crisis

Trends within Jordanian public opinion	Percentage (Responses)	Suggested solution (“Ideal Solution to the Syrian crisis”) emphasized	percent
Responses that emphasize the change in the political regime	82	The stepping down of Bashar al-Assad	68
		The forcible ouster of the Assad regime	7
		The removal of Bashar al-Assad from power and bringing him before trial	4
		Foreign intervention – whether by Arab states or the “Great Powers” – to end the crisis in favor of the Syrian revolution	3
Responses emphasizing that the regime is to initiate reforms and begin a dialogue with the country’s political opposition and the wider Syrian public	5	Regime-led reforms and a dialogue between the regime and the opposition, as well as the Syrian people more broadly	4
		Regime-led reforms and the trial of regime officials for actions committed either during the crisis or previously	0.4
		An end to foreign intervention – the West, Turkey, Iran, or Russia – supporting either the opposition or the regime	1
Bringing the revolution to an end	3		
Other responses	0.4		
Do not know/refused to answer	10		
Total	100		

As in other places within this report, responses to the above open-ended question about the nature of an ideal solution to the Syrian crisis do not show any significant correlation with geographic location (Governorate in which the respondent lives), gender, or educational attainment.

The Jordanian Public's Perception of Events in Syria

For more than 17 months now, Arab public opinion has been engrossed in a number of the events that have formed milestones along the path of events in Syria. During this period, beginning with the first, unarmed demonstrations, official organs of the Syrian regime have sought to portray the conflict as one of the Syrian forces facing gangs of fundamentalist armed militants whose actions were supposedly a part of a regional, and perhaps even global, conspiracy against the country. In parallel to this, however, is the vibrant debate continuing to take place not only in Syria, but also throughout the Arab region. It is a discussion premised on the idea that what is happening in Syria today is a peaceful revolution against the regime. With the passage of time and the progression of events, however, points of view began to evolve, and much public debate has taken account of how the initially peaceful revolution became militarized, albeit in a bid to secure self-defense against a regime that was behaving ruthlessly with the uprising. In fact, some of the people have begun to see the silence and apathy of the world powers toward the onslaught of government violence against the Syrian people as evidence of a conspiracy on the part of some regional powers, such as Israel, to have the entire Syrian state dismantled and destroyed for their own ends.

The respondents to this survey were presented with two statements, and asked to choose the one which most closely matched their own opinions. These two statements were:

- 1) What is taking place in Syria today is a popular revolution against the regime;
and
- 2) What is taking place in Syria today is part of a foreign conspiracy against Syria.

Fifty-seven percent of Jordanian respondents chose the first statement, describing the events in Syria as the result of a popular revolution against the regime, with 35% expressing the opinion that the events in Syria were the result of a foreign conspiracy against the country.

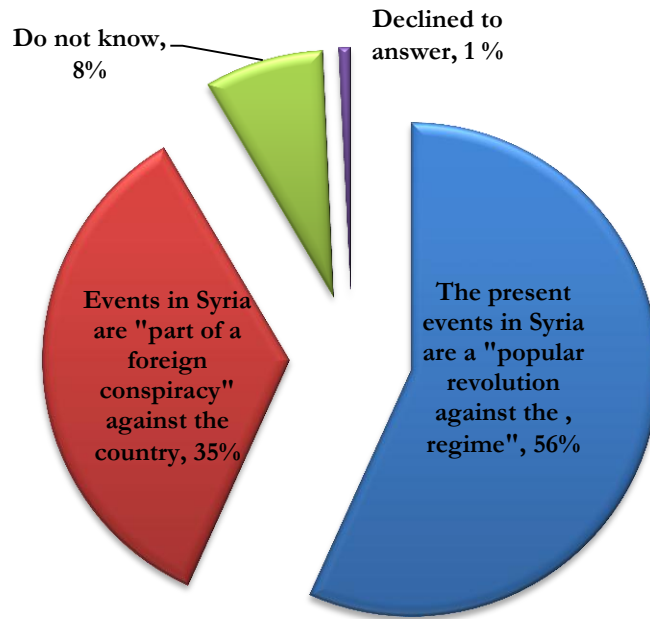


Figure 2: Foreign conspiracy or popular uprising? Jordanian respondents' opinions on the nature of the Syrian crisis by percentage

Thus, while a majority of Jordanians regard the events in Syria to be an uprising of the people against the regime, there is an important section of society – representing roughly one-third of the Jordanian people – who regards what is happening to be the result of an external conspiracy aimed at Syria, while a significant 8% of those asked could not select one of these two statements to describe their perception of the situation.

While the survey did not pose any more detailed questions to the respondents about their explanations of the unfolding events in Syria, it was possible to cross-tabulate Jordanians' responses with those provided to other questions, specifically their attitudes toward an "ideal solution" to the Syrian crisis. Such a cross-tabulation indicates that those who deemed the crisis in Syria to be the result of a foreign conspiracy do not necessarily accept the Syrian regime's interpretation of the events, nor do they support the regime.

In fact, 75% of those who agreed with the statement that "What is taking place in Syria today is part of a foreign conspiracy against Syria" also expressed the view that the solution to the problems in Syria rested with a change of the political regime, an eventuality which included either the resignation of Bashar al-Assad, his ouster, his facing trial or providing support to the Syrian people in fulfillment of their aspirations

[to have him removed]. It can be inferred, therefore, that what most of this group regard as a foreign conspiracy is the support of foreign powers for the regime against the Syrian people.

In fact, only 5% of those who viewed the situation in Syria as the result of a conspiracy from abroad also provided answers to the open ended question (Question 2) which suggested that the "ideal solution" to the Syrian crisis would come through either putting an end to the revolution or the prevention of foreign intervention. In other words, this sub-group, who account for only 1.75% of the aggregated responses (significantly less than the reported margin of error), are the only Jordanians who can reliably be said to have adopted the Syrian government's line. On the other hand, 10% of those who described the situation in Syria as a conspiracy, or 6 % of the aggregate of Jordanian respondents, also expressed the view that the ideal solution to the Syrian crisis would come through dialogue between the Syrian regime, the opposition, and the wider Syrian public. Some of this group had also expressed the view that some of the regime's officials should be brought to trial. Indeed, roughly 75% of those who expressed the belief that the crisis in Syria was the result of a conspiracy also believed that an ideal solution to the crisis in Syria would come from a change of the ruling regime in Syria.

In conclusion, while more than one-third of Jordanians did seem in the first instance to echo the Syrian regime's claim that the Syrian crisis was the result of a conspiracy, no statistically significant group of Jordanians can be shown to support the Syrian regime's position entirely. It may be concluded, in fact, that some of this group believe the Syrian regime itself to be a party to a conspiracy against its own people, or perhaps that they are willing to support a change of regime in the neighboring country even given the possible presence of a foreign conspiracy.

Table 2: How Jordanians' perception of the Syrian crisis compare to their proposed solutions to it

Jordanians' description of an ideal solution to the Syrian crisis	The Jordanian Public's Perception of events in Syria: How Jordanians describe the situation in Syria			
	Events in Syria are a popular revolution against the regime	Events in Syria are the result of a foreign conspiracy	Do not know	Declined to answer
A change of the political regime	92	75	38	15
Fundamental and serious political reforms undertaken by the regime and engagement in dialogue with the opposition as well as the Syrian public	1	10	10	9
Bringing the revolution to an end	1	5	0.3	--
Others	0.1	1	--	--
Do not know/Declined to answer	5	10	52	76
Total	100	100	100	100

Summary of Results

- The preferred solution to the Syrian crisis, for the vast majority of Jordanians, would be achieved through meaningful and serious reforms on the part of the regime, and greater regime responsiveness to the popular will of the Syrian people. In other words, the vast majority of Jordanians maintain that an ideal solution to the Syrian crisis would come through radical changes to the ruling regime in Syria and that regime's compliance with the demands of the Syrian people. The results reported here indicate that Jordanian public support for the Syrian revolution is, at 82%, nearly unanimous, with only roughly 3% of Jordanians, a proportion which can be dismissed as statistically insignificant, reliably reported to support the Syrian regime's version of events and its methods in dealing with the popular rebellion.
- Four-fifths of the Jordanian population believe that it would be best for Syria if Bashar al-Assad departed from power, with only 11% of Jordanians objecting to the departure of al-Assad as a means to achieving the best possible outcome for

Syria. Further to this, when respondents' opinions on the fate of al-Assad are compared to their answers to questions about the change of regime, it becomes clear that a section of those who do not support al-Assad's departure from power adopt their position not out of support for him. Rather, it can be deduced that their opinions are based on their worries that al-Assad's ouster would further complicate the Syrian crisis, making the country of Syria itself the bigger loser.

- A clear majority of Jordanians, at 57%, hold the view that the Syrian crisis is a popular revolution of the Syrian people against their regime, while only 35% describe the crisis as the result of the conspiracy against Syria. Even among this latter group, however, three-quarters provide answers which indicate their support for a change of the political regime in Syria. In other words, a significant proportion of the Jordanian people – roughly 26% of the aggregate group – believe the Syrian regime itself to be a party to the conspiracy against their own country.

Taken together, these results demonstrate that the Jordanian public is well aware of developments taking place in Syria, and that the vast majority of Jordanians hold clear, meaningful opinions on the crisis in Syria. Jordanians' views of the Syrian crisis, and their detailed suggestions for what their preferred solutions might be, indicate that the people of Jordan do not view the Syrian situation as entirely outside observers. The results indicate, instead, that the Jordanians view the Syrian crisis as an internal Syrian affair. This should not come as a surprise, as the two countries are geographically contiguous and form together a part of the same interdependent region: the Arab Levant (or *Mashreq*), or Greater Syria. One cannot ignore the close social bonds and networks between the societies of Jordan and Syria. Clearly, the arrival in Jordan of large waves of Syrian refugees for more than 12 months now has contributed to heighten this sense of public concern for Syria on the part of the Jordanian public.