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ARAB CENTER FOR RESEARCH & POLICY STUDIES

Measurement of Arab Public Opinion Project

Arab Opinion Index 2011

Executive Summary

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies is an independent research institute and think tank for the study of history and social sciences, with particular emphasis on the applied social sciences.

The Center's paramount concern is the advancement of Arab societies and states, their cooperation with one another and issues concerning the Arab nation in general. To that end, it seeks to examine and diagnose the situation in the Arab world - states and communities- to analyze social, economic and cultural policies and to provide political analysis, from an Arab perspective.

The Center publishes in both Arabic and English in order to make its work accessible to both Arab and non-Arab researchers.

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The survey in question was conducted during 2011 in 12 Arab countries: Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine (the West Bank and Gaza), Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen. It was carried out via multi-staged cluster samples representative of the societies included, with a margin of error not exceeding 3.5 percent. Overall, some 16,173 respondents were interviewed, with the assistance of several Arab research centers.

The results of the survey indicate that most Arab citizens support the Arab revolutions: 70 percent of respondents supported the protests that ended the rule of former Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, while 80 percent express support for the protests which ousted former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.*

Respondents explained these revolutions through a number of ways, explaining that they were the result of such things as dictatorship, the curtailment of political and civil liberties, the monopolization of power, and the absence of a state of justice and equality among citizens. The respondents further expressed the opinion that economic stagnation was a significant cause of the revolutions.

The vast majority of respondents from Egypt and Tunisia said they believed that within three years, their countries' situations would be better than they were during the reigns of Mubarak and Ben Ali.

The survey's results show democracy to be well-rooted in Arab public opinion. Most respondents (81 percent) were able to detail a meaningful, substantive type of democratic system which they would accept as fitting their needs.

Arab citizens, as represented by the sample who were questioned for this survey, focus on political aspects when defining democracy: the respondents emphasized the importance of political pluralism, and the protection of political and civil liberties, as well as social justice, to the functioning of a democracy. This in addition to the importance of the transfer of power, while 12 percent of respondents emphasized the importance

* Respondents in Saudi Arabia were not asked their opinion of the Egyptian revolution; likewise, respondents in Sudan were not asked about either the Egyptian or the Tunisian revolutions.

of matters related to economic and social development, security and stability in democracy.

The survey's results indicate that most citizens in the Arab region - more than two-thirds – support a democratic system and see it as the best system, “even if imperfect”, while 15 percent of respondents oppose democracy. This preference for democracy highlights the strong pro-democracy bias amongst Arabs, who seemingly refused to accept arguments against democracy that are based on the need for economic stability and security.

The results indicate that public opinion in the Arab region is inclined to reject the monopolization of power. There is almost unanimous rejection (86 percent) of the inheritance of power in republican systems versus 7 percent of respondents who demonstrate support for the idea. On the other hand, only 53 percent of respondents supported the rise to power through democratic means of a political party the political views of which they were opposed to; notably, 36 percent of respondents were opposed to such a change.

In general, respondents expressed low confidence for the extent to which democracy is practiced in their own countries at present. On a scale of 0 to 10 points, with 10 being the most democratic and 0 the least possibly democratic system possible, the respondents evaluated the level of democracy in their countries to be 4.7 points as an average over the twelve countries. These results strongly suggest that Arabs generally have little regard for the extent of democratization in their countries.

Although most respondents described themselves as either “very religious” or “religious to a certain extent,” 71 percent report that their interactions with others – economic, human, political or social – are not affected by whether or not their interlocutor is religious non-religious (whether or not that person is religiously observant). Moreover, a strong plurality, 47 percent, supports the argument that “religious practices are private practices and should be separated from public life and politics,” against 38 percent who oppose it.

Public opinion regarding this principle of the separation of religion from politics is divided, as shown by the survey results, despite the fact that the same principle is strongly in evidence when it comes to practical demands: two-thirds of respondents, as

reported above, being opposed to the idea of clerical interference in politics, rejecting the idea that clerics be able to influence voting by the public or matters of government policy.

The results of the Arab Opinion Index warn that levels of trust between citizens and their states are at a very low point. The confidence that citizens have in their countries' state institutions varies widely from one institution to the next. While a relatively high number (77 percent) express confidence in their armies, only half feel the same about their countries' general security apparatus (a term which is variably the police or the state security services). Meanwhile, 57 percent expressed confidence in the judicial system while less than half of respondents have confidence in their governments (47 percent) and their parliaments (36 percent).

Most respondents expressed a negative view of the performance of their countries legislatures, in terms of those legislatures' monitoring their governments, addressing citizens' concerns, and protecting public interests. On average, only 30 percent were satisfied with their parliaments. Respondents also took dim views of their governments' economic and foreign policies. Only 31 percent of respondents see their countries' economic policies as taking their views into consideration while just 34 percent believe that their countries' foreign policies express their opinions. There is a nearly unanimous opinion (83 percent) that financial and administrative corruption is very widespread, as opposed to only 4 percent who believe that it is not prevalent, with most respondents expressing the view that their countries' legal code is not equally applied to all citizens ("justice is not blind" in Arab countries, one could say).

This gap in confidence indicates that Arab states face a crisis of legitimacy in the eyes of their citizens. We infer from this that when the government fails to implement practical policies that would lead citizens to change their views on its economic and foreign policies, and when that same government does nothing to fight corruption and favors one category of citizens over another, not abiding by democratic procedures, then that state is certain to lose its legitimacy.

On another front, the vast majority of respondents (71 percent) believe that the population of the Arab world represents a single nation, and half of them firmly believe that the peoples of this nation are distinguished from each other by particular characteristics and features. This contrasts with a mere 17 percent of respondents who

see the various peoples in different Arab states as being tied by only weak, tenuous bonds.

The perception of a single nation is reinforced by the ability of most respondents (81 percent) to name countries that represent a source of threat to the security of the Arab homeland; there was little notable opposition to the concept of there being a possible threat to something like the "Arab homeland," serving to further highlight the acceptance of Arabness amongst the people of these countries.

Some 73 percent of respondents believe that Israel and the United States are the two countries that most threaten the security of the Arab world, followed by Iran at 5 percent. In addition, 84 percent believe that the Palestinian cause is an issue which unites all Arabs, not only the Palestinians.

Public opinion in the Arab region largely supports an increase in cooperation among Arab countries; additionally, it supports taking necessary actions that are unifying in nature, including the establishment of joint Arab military forces, in addition to individual countries' respective armies, the abolition of customs and tariffs on trade among Arab countries, and the unification of monetary systems with the aim of creating a single Arab currency.

Respondents from across the Arab region were again almost unanimous (84 percent) in rejecting government recognition of Israel, including in countries whose governments have signed peace agreements with Israel, while only 10 percent support it. The aforementioned peace agreements enjoy support from just 21 percent of respondents.

Most respondents (55 percent) support having the Middle East declared a nuclear-weapons-free zone, against 29 percent who oppose it. The majority, also 55 percent, believes that Israel's possession of nuclear weapons would justify their possession by other countries in the region. The nuclear monopoly enjoyed by Israel, which respondents see as one of the two key threats to the security of the Arab homeland, presents an interesting case of how the opinions of the Arab public are nuanced and can change. Arab citizens, when faced with the threat of a nuclear-armed Israel, reconsider their own abhorrence for armaments.