2014 Arab Opinion Index: Highlights of Findings

The 2014 Arab Opinion Index, an annual poll of public opinion was held in 14 Arab countries: Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Yemen and Kuwait. The aim of the survey is to understand Arab public attitudes towards a number of important political, economic and social questions, particularly public attitudes towards democracy and civic and political participation in the Arab region. The Arab Opinion Index is an annual program of the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.

The total sample size for the 2014 Arab Opinion Index was 26,618 respondents: these include 21,152 respondents in the 14 countries reported above, and a further 5,466 Syrian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons. The Syrian Refugees were located across refugee camps and other population centers in Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey, while the Syrian IDPs were located along the Syrian-Turkish frontier. The surveyed populations represent a total of 90% of the overall population of the Arab League. Sampling for each group was done using a randomized, stratified, multi-staged, self-weighted clustered approach, and provided a margin of error of between 2% and 3% for each population group. The face-to-face interviews through which respondents participated took place between January and July, 2014.

This year's results reveal sharp divisions with regard to the revolutions of the Arab Spring: while 45% of the respondents expressed the view that the Arab Spring and the corresponding changes were positive developments, 42% evaluated these changes negatively. Respondents whose views of the Arab revolutions were negative were not necessarily opposed to the Arab Spring, in principle. They cited the following as reasons behind their positions: the large toll of human losses and suffering; the revolutions' failure to realize their objectives; the spread of chaos and the lack of security; the destruction of states and state institutions; and the destabilization of certain countries which were crisis-stricken. A mere 5% of those who evaluated the Arab Spring negatively did so out of a principled opposition to the revolutions, and held the belief that the Arab Spring was
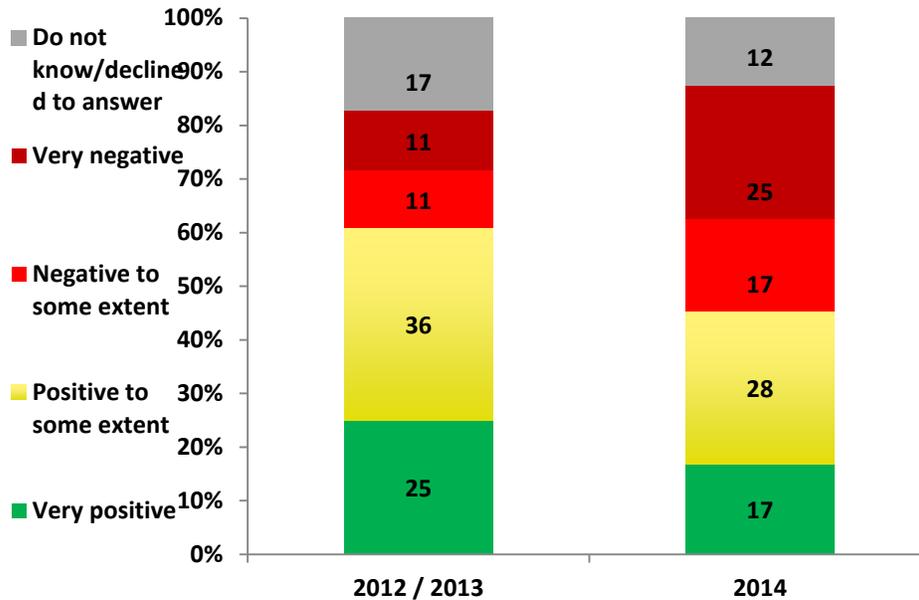
the result of a foreign conspiracy.

Figure 1 Respondents' attitudes towards the Arab Spring from the 2014 Arab Opinion Index and the 2012/2013 Arab Opinion Index

In spite of this, the Arab public remains confident and optimistic with regard to the Arab Spring and its chances of success: 60% believe that while the Arab Spring is passing through a "phase of difficult obstacles", it will ultimately achieve its aims. This compares with a mere 17% who believe that the Arab Spring has ended, and that the old regimes have returned to power. Respondents indicated a number of factors as being responsible for the "phase of difficult obstacles", including: destabilized security situations; a deterioration of economic conditions; foreign intervention; the emergence of extremist movements; and agitation on the part of the former regimes and by state-controlled media.
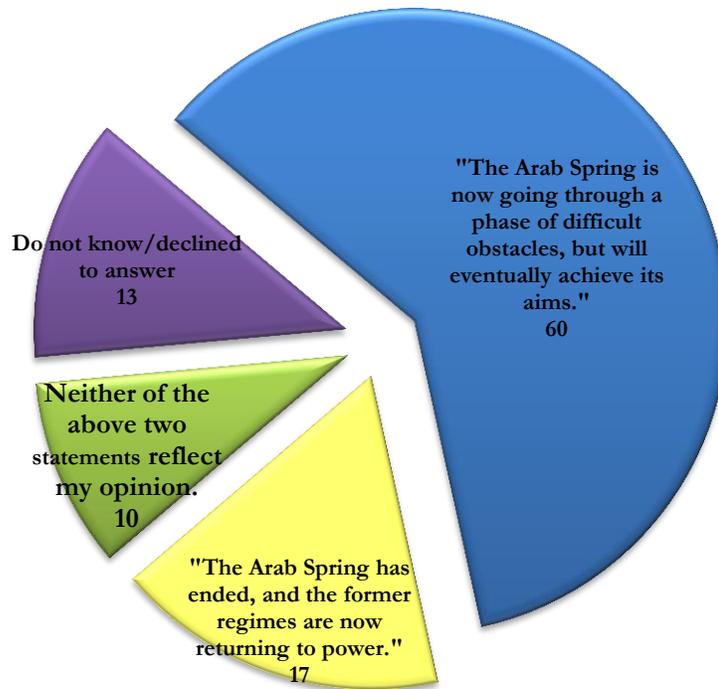
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"The Arab Spring is now going through a phase of difficult obstacles, but will eventually achieve its aims."
60

Do not know/declined to answer
13

Neither of the above two statements reflect my opinion.
10

"The Arab Spring has ended, and the former regimes are now returning to power."
17

Figure 2 A majority of the Arab public remains optimistic about the chances of the Arab Spring to succeed in achieving its aims.

The Arab public is more unanimous when it comes to Bashar al Assad and the Syrian revolution, with 68% of respondents expressing varying degrees of support for the statement that, "It would be better for Syria today if Bashar al Assad stepped down". The reasons cited by these respondents focused on his "tyranny", his dispossession of the Syrian people and that Assad represented to them the cause of the Syrian crisis.
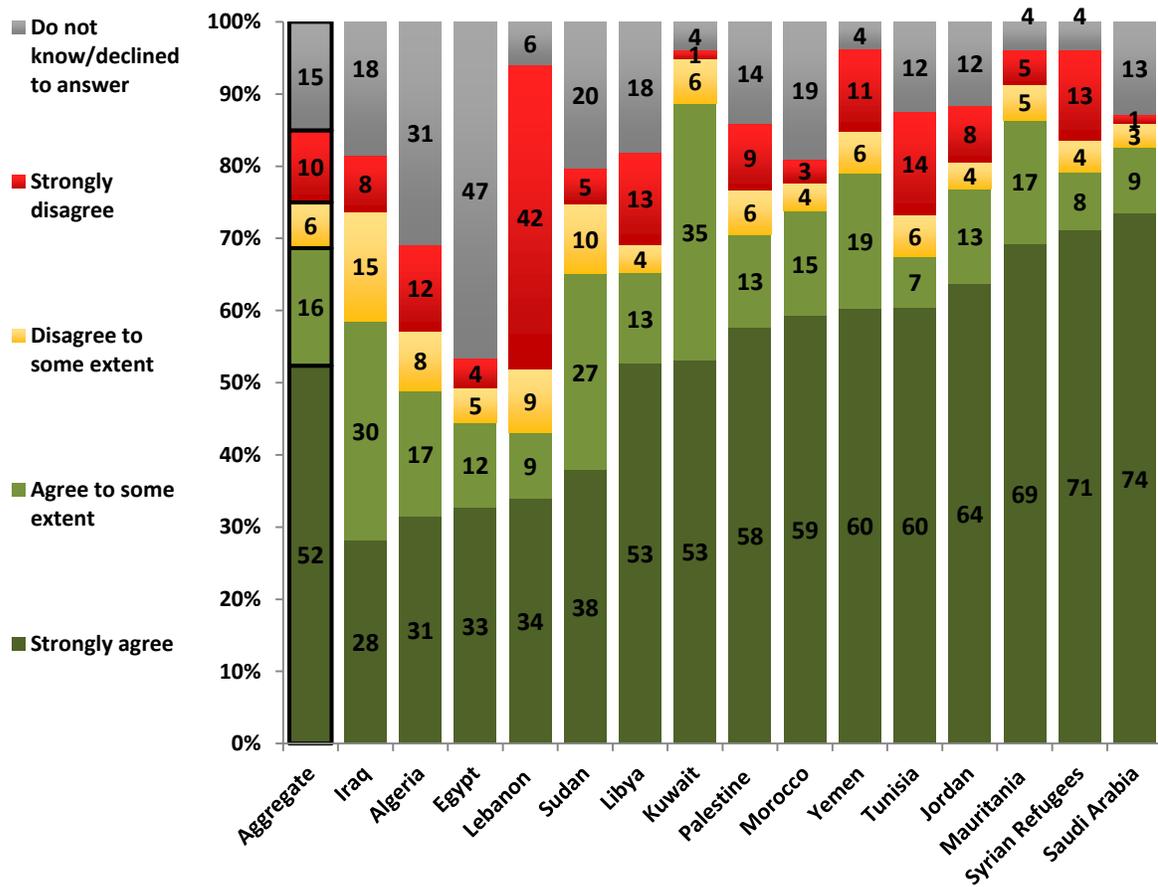
Figure 3 The Arab public, and across all countries, remains broadly in unison with regards to the demand that Bashar al Assad step down from power.

Opinion towards the deposition of former Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi, meanwhile, was more divided. Fully 41% of the Arab public expressed their opposition to the deposition of elected President Mohammed Morsi of Egypt, viewing it as a military coup against the will of the people, and an affront to democratic legitimacy. Nearly one-third of the those polled, however, viewed the deposition of Morsi as a positive development. These respondents cited reasons such as limiting the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood, ending the country's political crisis/achieving safety and stability and fulfilling the wishes of the Egyptian

people for their positions.

The Arab public fears the rise to power of both Islamist and non-Islamist/secular political groupings: 43% of respondents indicated that they had fears regarding the increased influence of political Islamists, compared to 40% who said that they did not. For non-Islamist/secular political parties, these figures were 37% and 41%, respectively. Respondents gave clear and coherent explanations for such fears. It is clear there is a large group of respondents who fear both of these camps, and the extent of these fears is indicative of the level of political polarization in Arab public opinion. The inability of Islamist and non-Islamist/secular political movements to cooperate is an obstacle to democratic transition, and will allow non-democratic institutions to exploit the public's fears and push towards greater authoritarianism.
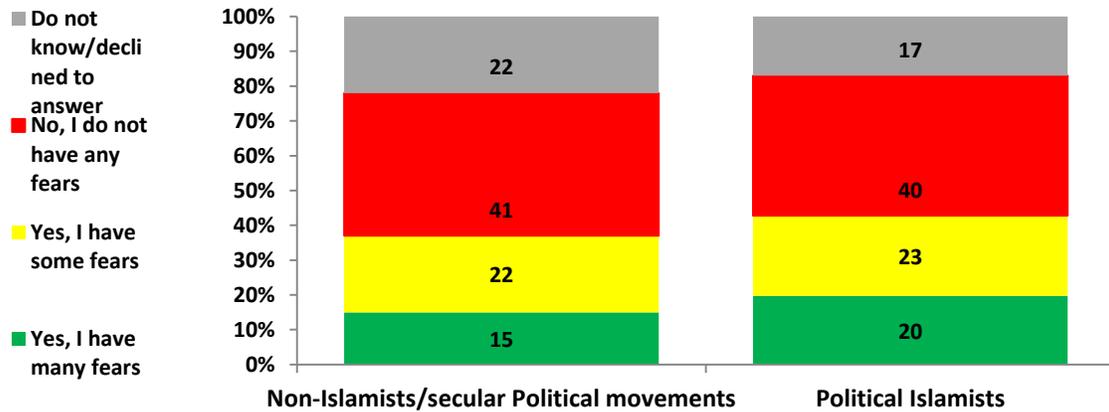

Figure 4 Respondents fear, to greater or lesser extent, the rise of either Islamist or Non–Islamist/secular movements.

Priorities

Responses to the 2014 Arab Opinion Index reflect a change in priorities among Arab populations, with 20% reporting concerns over "safety and security" as the primary challenge which their home countries face. This primacy of a non-economic factor is unprecedented; in the two previous surveys, unemployment had been the respondents' most-cited challenge. This trend was clearly echoed in how respondents' evaluated the political situations of their home countries: only 36% described the political situation of their home countries as positive (to varying extents), compared to 59% who offered negative appraisals for the political situations of their home countries. Notably, respondents' evaluation of their home countries' political situations was more negative for the 2014 Arab Opinion Index compared to the 2012/2013 poll.
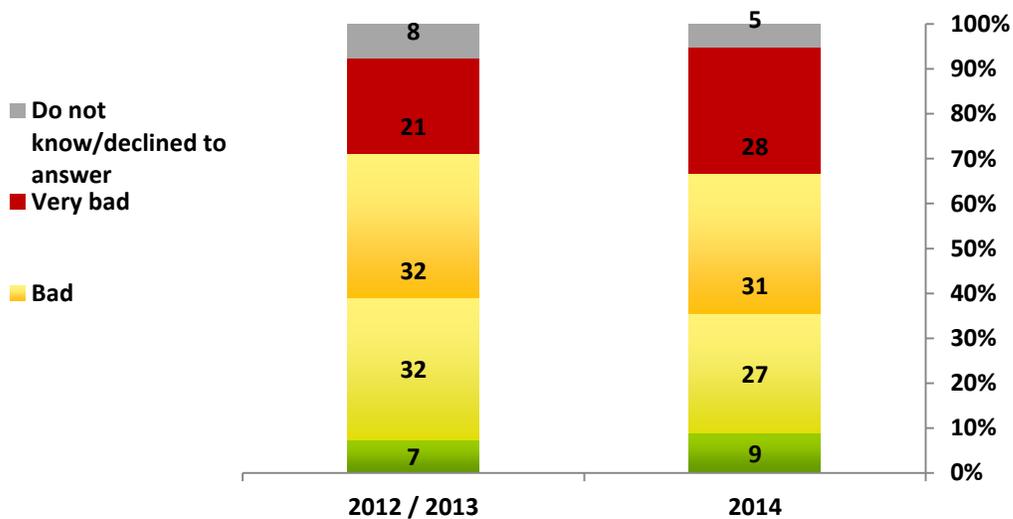

Figure 5 Respondents' evaluations of their home countries political situations was more negative during the 2014 survey compared to the 2012/2013 poll.

6

Household financial circumstances

Respondents' self-reporting of their households' financial situations revealed deep dissatisfaction. Only 21% of the Arab public reported a household income which allows them to save, while 42% of respondents reported that their household income covers necessities, but does not allow them to save (these are families living in "hardship"). Another 32% of Arab households reported that they "live in need" (or are "needy"), with their income not covering all of their necessary expenditures.
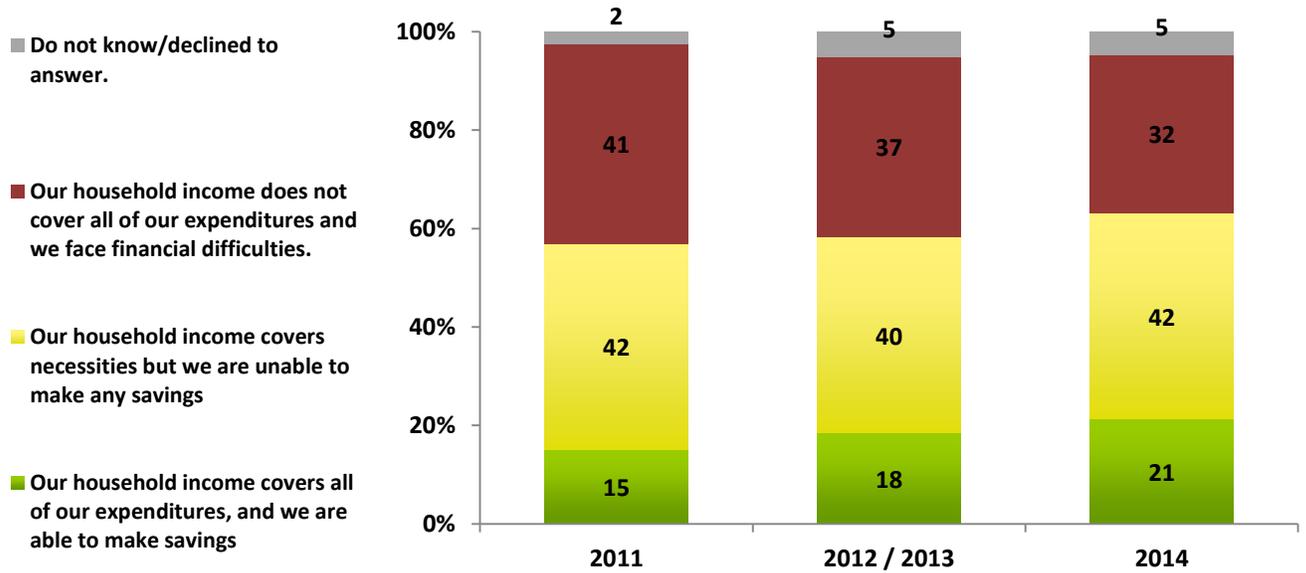

Figure 6 Respondents' self-reported household income and the extent to which this covers expenditures.

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Systems of Government

A clear majority of the Arab public, 73%, voiced support for democracy when asked about their attitude towards various systems of government. Only 17% were opposed to democracy.
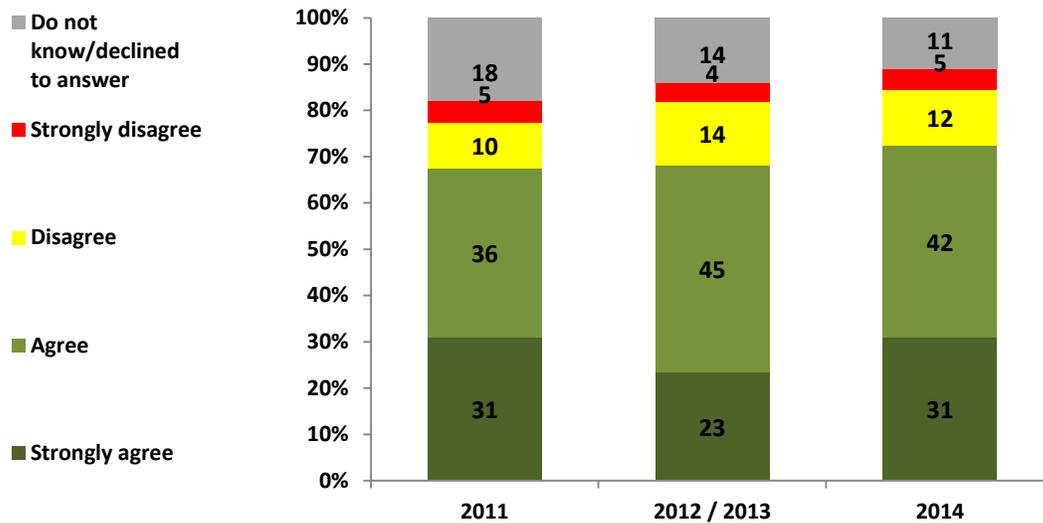

Figure 7 Respondents to the Arab Opinion Index have consistently agreed that democracy remains better than other forms of government.

In total, 77% of the Arab public, in the 2014 survey, held the view that a pluralist, democratic system was appropriate for their home countries. This compares to proportions of between 61% and 75% of respondents who believed that other systems, such authoritarian rule; rule based on Islamic Sharia; or electoral systems where participation was restricted to either Islamist-only or exclusively non-religious political parties, were inappropriate for their countries.
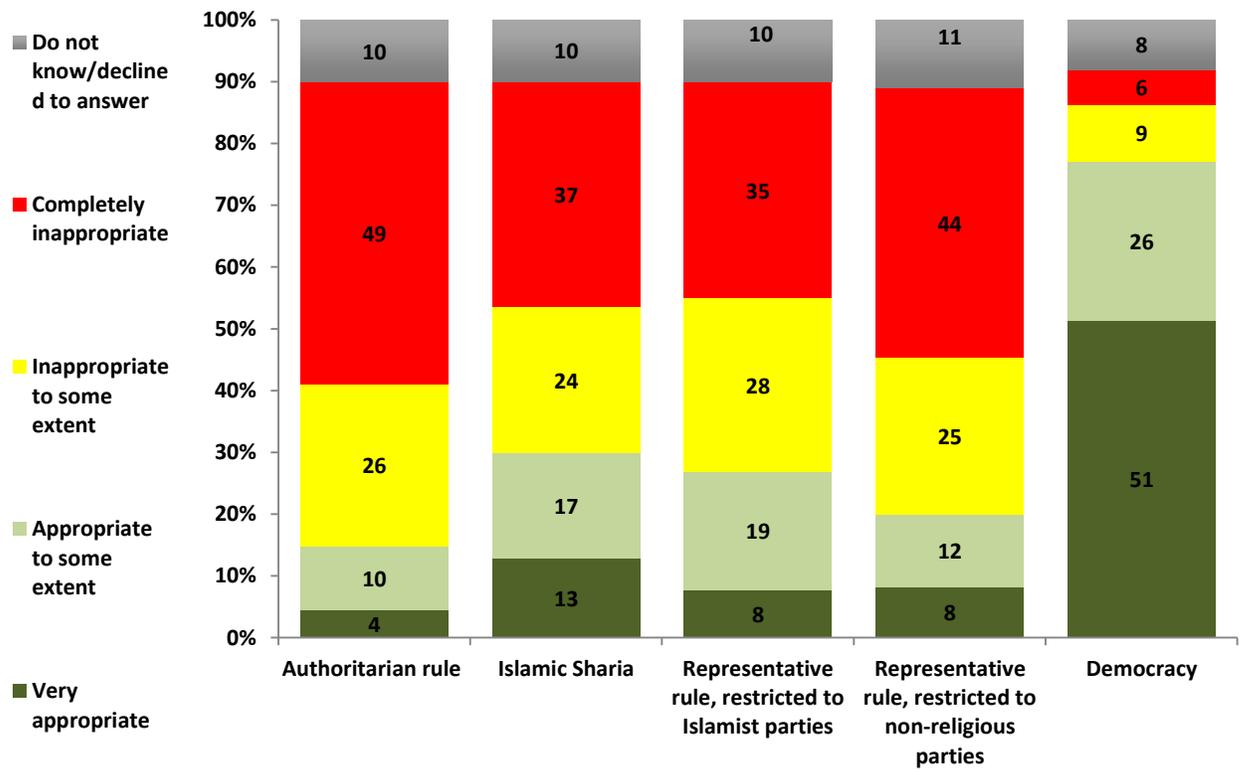
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Figure 8 Respondents' views of the appropriateness or otherwise of various forms of government.

The Arab Nation

An overwhelming majority of the Arabs view inter-Arab fraternity very favorably; a total of 81% of Arab respondents viewed the citizens of the various Arab states as "one nation sharing the same characteristics, even if they are divided by artificial borders" or as "one nation, although each of the peoples within that nation have their own distinct characteristics". This compares with only 14% of respondents who view the Arab peoples as composed of distinct, separate nations.

Do not know/declined to answer

They are in fact different nations and peoples tied together by only tenuous links

They are one nation, although each of the peoples within that nation have their own distinct characteristics

They are one nation sharing the same characteristics, even if they are divided by artificial borders

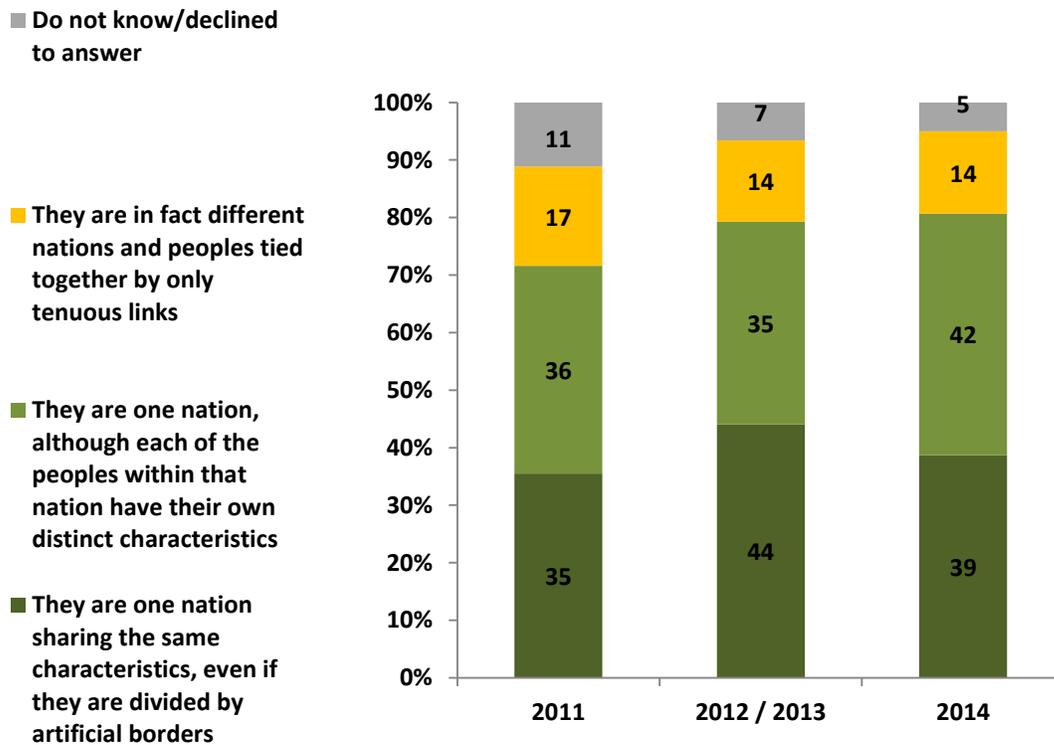|	2011	2012 / 2013	2014
Do not know/declined	11	7	5
Different nations	17	14	14
One nation, distinct characteristics	36	35	42
One nation, same characteristics	35	44	39

Figure 9 Respondents from across the Arab region tend to view the Arab peoples as forming a unitary nation.

Foreign Policy

Respondents tended to have similar views towards the foreign policies of non-Arab actors. The foreign policies of Russia, the United States and Iran

towards the Arab region were generally viewed negatively, while the foreign policies of China, France and Turkey towards the Arab region were viewed more positively. In addition, roughly two-thirds of the Arab public viewed either the United States or Israel as the single greatest threat to the collective security of the Arab region.
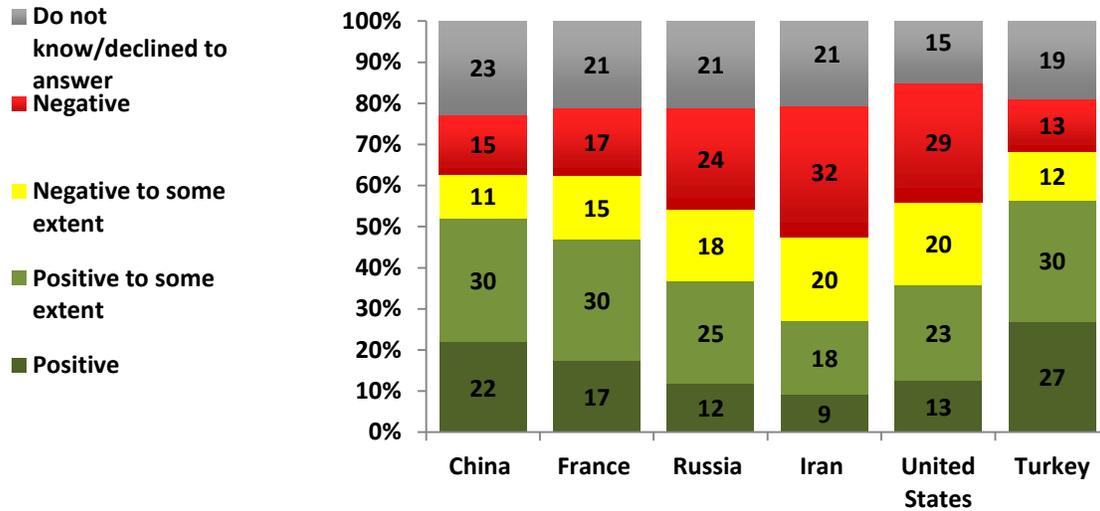

Figure 10 Respondents' evaluations of the foreign policies of a number of non-Arab countries towards the Arab region.

These attitudes towards collective Arab security and the national security of respondents' home countries were reflected in the sentiments towards the recognition of Israel by respondents' home countries. Fully 87% of Arabs are opposed to the recognition of Israel by the governments of their home countries, and provide a number of politically grounded, coherent justifications for this stance.
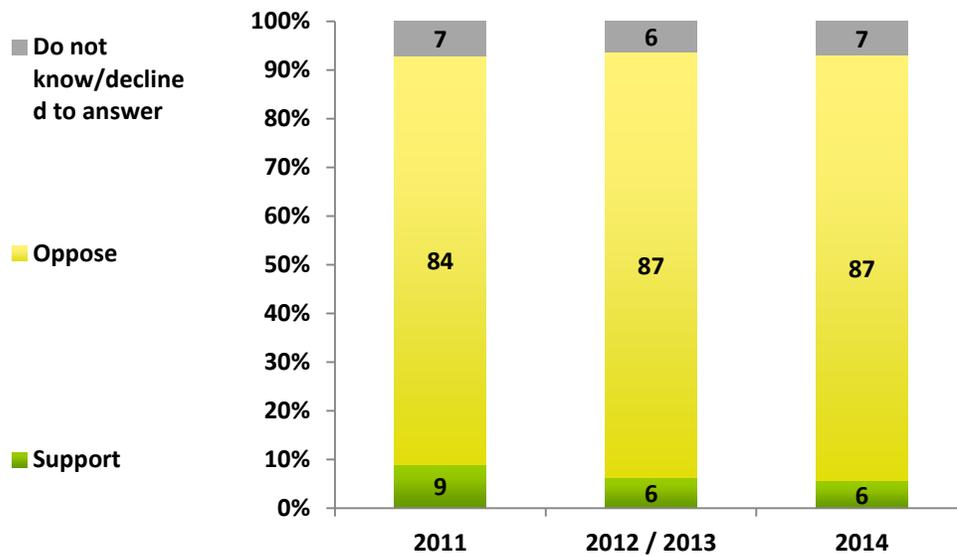
Figure 11 A consistent and clear majority of Arab respondents are opposed to the recognition of Israel by the governments of their home countries.

| Respondents opposed to the recognition of Israel by their home countries: reasons cited	Aggregate response(%)
Israel is a colonialist, expansionist state	25.1
It is a Zionist entity which treats the Arabs with disdain and racism	13.1
Because of Israeli enmity towards my people in particular/the Arabs in general	12.3
Doing so would be to accept the destruction of the Palestinian homeland	8.1
Its dispossession of the Palestinians and its continued oppression of those people	5.9
(Israel) threatens my home country's national security and destabilizes the region	2.7
It is an expansion state which seeks to dominate the Arab world and control its resources	2.5
It does not respect international law	2.5
It is a terrorist state/supports terrorism	1.2
Respondents who cited religious reasons	5.2

Media

Media consumption as revealed by the 2014 Arab Opinion Index has not changed significantly compared to previous surveys. Television remains by far the most important source of political information and news for the Arab public, with 76% of respondents reporting that they rely on this medium as their primary source of political news. The internet comes in as a distant second with 7% of respondents reporting that they rely on it as a primary source of political news; radio and daily newspapers are joint third at 6%. Specifically, satellite broadcast state broadcasters were by far the most popular choices as respondents' sources of political information, followed closely by the Al Jazeera network and the Al Arabiya network.

While reported internet usage has increased over the past year, there remains an even divide with 48% of Arabs reporting that they do not use the internet on a regular basis, compared to 50% who report that they do. Amongst those respondents who regularly use the internet, 71% have an account on Facebook, while 29% have an account on Twitter. A majority of these social media users use their accounts on these networks to engage with political affairs.
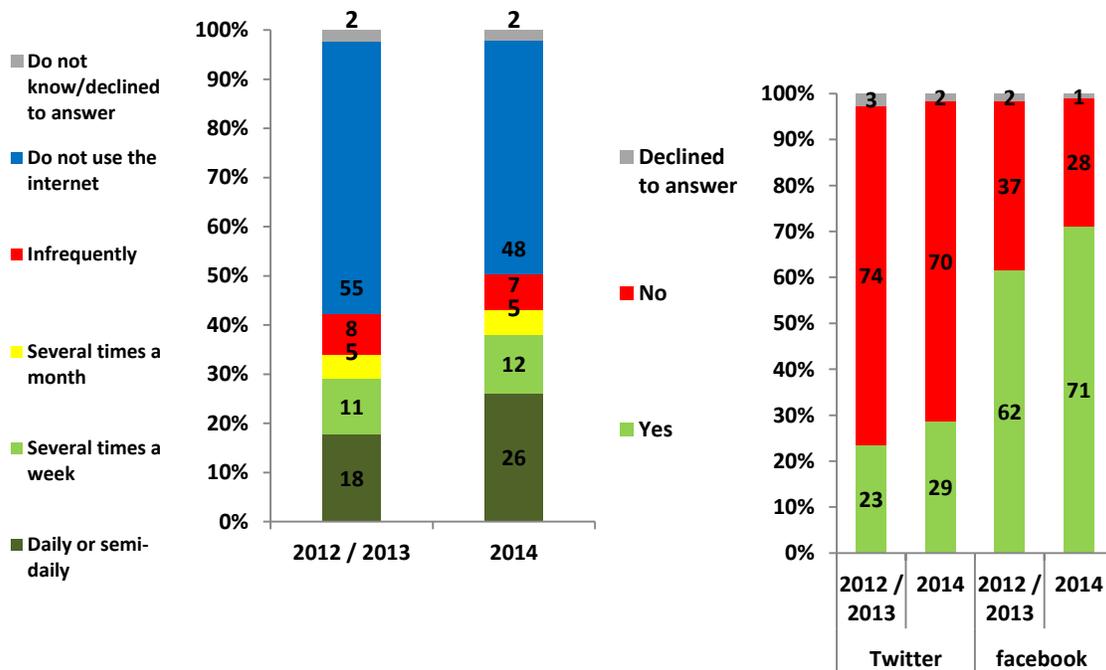
Religion, Religiosity and the Public Sphere

A majority of the Arab public is either "Very religious" (24%) or "Religious to some extent" (63%). When asked which attributes define religiosity, most respondents opt to choose characteristics based on an individual's morality and values. This contrasts with 8% of respondents who describe themselves as non-religious. Despite this deep-seated religiosity, however, the Arab publics stand opposed to the use of religion by the state or by religious clerics to achieve political ends, for example to influence voter choice or to win public approval. Yet when they are asked about their in-principle position on the separation of religion from politics, the Arab public is more reluctant, with no majority either demanding such a separation or opposing it. Finally, the religiosity of the Arab public does not imply a lack of tolerance: majorities across the Arab region are opposed to the use of religion either to cast off the followers of differing religions, or those who following varying interpretations of the same faith, as infidels.
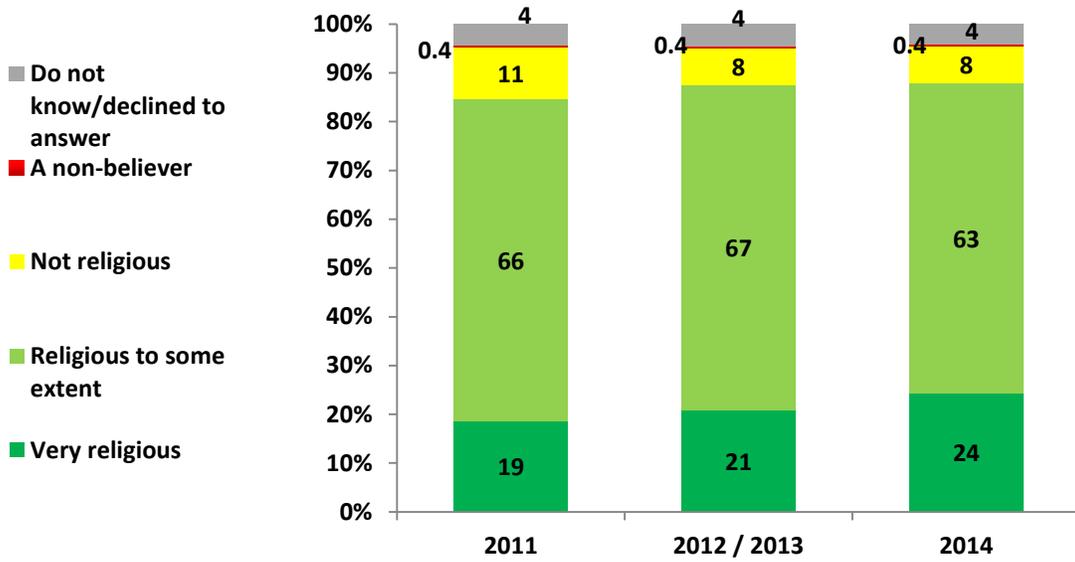
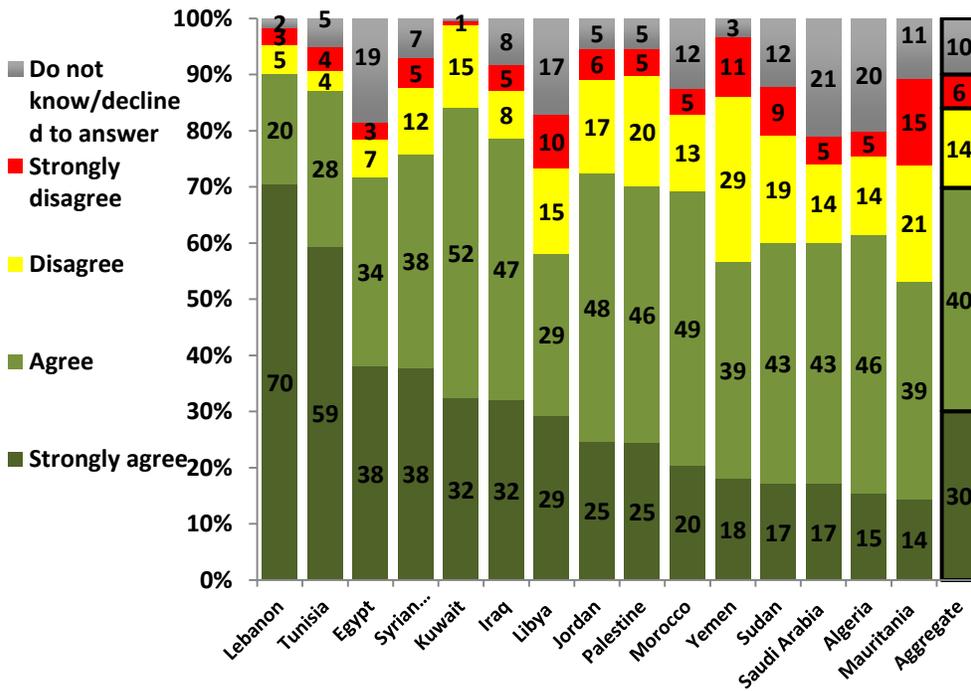Figure 12. A majority of the Arab public describes itself as religious, to varying extents.

Figure 13 Levels of agreement and disagreement with the statement: "No person/group has the right to declare followers of other religions to be infidels".
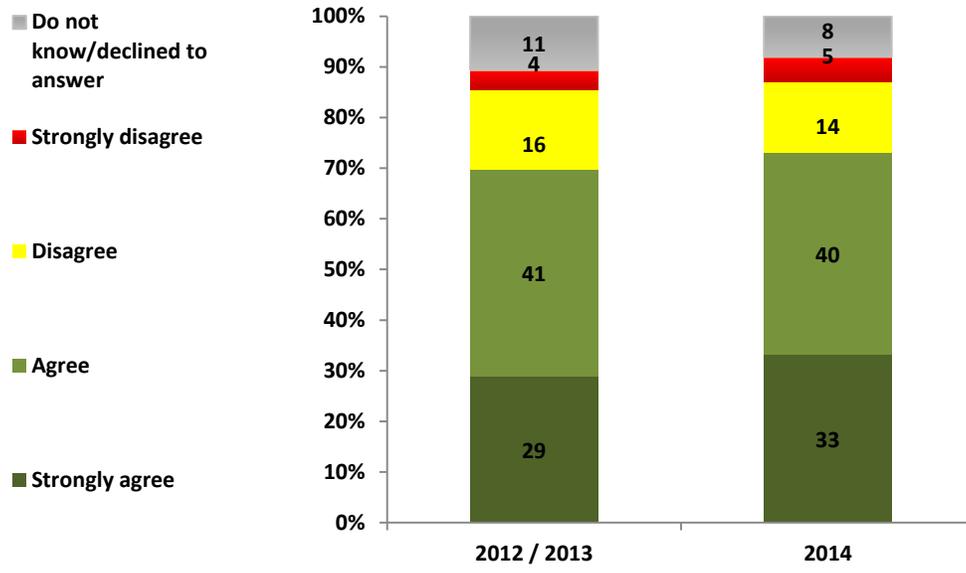
Figure14 Respondents' expressed their support for/opposition to the statement "The government does NOT have the
right to use religion as a means of winning public support."