



# Trajectories of Change in Civic and Political Participation in MENA

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December 2025



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**Funded by  
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# Introduction

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the 2000s were marked by extensive street mobilisation and contestation, which were rather non-ideological, focusing mostly on socioeconomic grievances. The 2010–11 Arab uprisings were the apogee of this contentious decade. The uprisings seemed to recede for most of the 2010s, only to re-emerge with further large-scale mobilisations in 2019 – the so-called Arab Spring 2.0 – which influenced regime breakdown in Sudan, the downfall of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algeria, the ousting of Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi in Iraq, and the stepping down of Prime Minister Saad Al-Hariri in Lebanon.

Recent dynamics and trajectories of civic and political participation in both formal and informal institutions show similarities and differences in the forms and levels of participatory modes. On the one hand, citizens mostly refrain from participation in political parties and civil society organisations, while turnout in parliamentary elections has been decreasing during the past few years. On the other hand, participation in protest politics is the norm, even when the percentage of the population taking part in such activities is not necessarily high. Protest activities vary in length and breadth across regimes, depending on the political context and the prevalent political opportunities. Most recently, after the war on Gaza, many countries like Morocco and Algeria have seen a surge in protest participation, while others like Egypt have had minimal protest participation.

Why do MENA citizens participate less in formal civic and political organisations? Why, on the other hand, do we see varied interest and participation in informal contentious activities, like street contention and online activism through social networking sites?

This paper analyses the relationship between low formal political participation and increasing informal participation in the majority of MENA regimes via protest activities. It argues that socioeconomic grievances are the main drivers of both trends, and that citizens' inability to change politics through formal means – elections and political parties have been forces for authoritarian entrenchment rather than change in MENA<sup>1</sup> – compels them to turn to other means.

I begin with a brief discussion of the political context in MENA since the 2010/11 uprisings, setting out the structural impediments to formal participation. I then analyse citizens' perceptions of and participation in formal politics during the 2020s. Subsequently, I examine protests over the past decade in two North African countries (Algeria and Morocco) and two Middle Eastern countries (Iraq and Jordan), chosen because their dynamics display both similarities and differences.

## Political context in MENA since 2011

The Arab uprisings and resultant breakdown of many regimes that were previously believed to be strong, like Egypt and Tunisia, have influenced both citizens and governments across MENA. For both citizens and governing elites, the exposure of regimes' institutional fragility and volatility has shattered the idea of a "strong" Arab state. Citizens have broken through the barrier of fear to mobilise through street protests, strikes, and sit-ins, while many regimes – particularly those undergoing regime-building, like Egypt – have increased their security and changed their political structures to build trusted networks of elites, exclude potential threats (from insiders and outsiders), and fend off further large-scale contention. As a result, there has been a surge in repression regionwide.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, the proliferation of neoliberal economic policies<sup>i</sup> – including fiscal austerity, market liberalisation, increases in Gulf Foreign Direct Investments, and changes to taxation that enabled the privatisation of public services – have led to an increase in poverty, inequality, and unemployment (which were among the main drivers of the 2010/11 uprisings) and the deterioration of public services, particularly education and healthcare.<sup>3</sup> These new policies have further marginalised large segments of MENA citizens, whose living standards have declined over the past decade – and regimes have relied heavily on repression and violence to suppress dissent.<sup>4</sup>

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i Neoliberal economic policies are based on the deregulation of the financial sector, trade liberalisation and privatisation. In this sense, the market is freely governed without state interventions. "Liberal" refers to being "free," in this context, free of government intervention including regulation.<sup>5</sup> It constitutes the internationalisation of market capital. This is developed through a process of interlocking various commodity chains across the world, which is dominated by large capital and business conglomerates. The Gulf has become an important player in this chain.<sup>6</sup>

## Formal politics: perceptions and participation

The deteriorating political context since 2011 has negatively affected how MENA citizens perceive their formal political institutions – and democracy itself – over the same time period (see table 1).

Table 1: MENA citizens' perceptions of their political institutions since 2011\*

	2011 Arab Barometer Wave II	2021 Arab Barometer Wave VI	2022 Arab Barometer Wave VII	2024 Arab Barometer Wave VIII
<b>% who associate democracy with weak economic performance:</b>				
Tunisia	17%		70%	
Iraq	26%		72%	
<b>% who are interested in politics:</b>				
Egypt	55%			7%
<b>% who trust their government:</b>				
MENA **	53%			30%
Jordan	74%			39%
Lebanon	22%			7%
<b>% who are dissatisfied with their government:</b>				
MENA **				64%
Morocco				71%
Iraq				55%
Jordan				53%
<b>% who think their government is not responsive to their needs:</b>				
MENA **				75%
<b>% who do not trust their parliamentary representatives:</b>				
MENA **				76%
Tunisia				84%
Lebanon				76%
<b>% who think their last parliamentary elections were not free and fair:</b>				
Tunisia	36%		44%	
Lebanon	23%		41%	
Jordan	30%		51%	

For more information on the Arab Barometer and its methodology, please refer to: <http://www.arabbarometer.com>

\* All figures are from the Arab Barometer survey data.<sup>7</sup>

\*\* Citizens from Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, and Tunisia.

Table 1 shows that during the second wave of the Arab Barometer in 2011, only 17% of Tunisian citizens and 26% of Iraqi citizens believed that democracy is associated with weak economic performance. However, by 2021, this number increased to 70% in Tunisia and to 72% in Iraq. Their interest in politics has also dropped from 2011 to today. The most dramatic drop in interest in politics can be seen in Egypt, with 55% interest in politics in 2011 compared to 7% interest in 2024, according to data from the Arab Barometer Wave VIII. Similarly, Arab citizens' trust in government during the same time-period fell from 53% to 30%.<sup>ii</sup> Jordan and Lebanon stand out, where trust in government fell from 74% to 39% in Jordan and from 22% to 7% in Lebanon. Today trust in parliament is also very low with 76% of Arab citizens reporting that they do not trust their elected parliament representatives. Tunisia stands out with 84% distrust, followed by 76% in Lebanon. When asked about their evaluation of their last parliamentary elections, 44% of Tunisians said that the elections were not free and not fair in 2022 compared to 36% in 2011. In Lebanon, the increase was almost double, with 41% compared to 23% in 2011. Jordan has seen similar results with 51% in 2022 compared to 30% in 2011.

In relation to trust, satisfaction with government is also very low. The dissatisfaction level with governments is 64% regionwide. In Morocco, for instance, dissatisfaction with government is at 71%, in Iraq it is 55% and in Jordan 53%. Not only are citizens not satisfied, but they also see that their governments are not responsive to their needs, with 75% saying that their governments are not responsive to their needs.

Unsurprisingly, MENA citizens' participation in formal politics has also fallen during the same time period (see table 2). The reason behind this is rising fiscal problems, inequalities, poverty levels, low provision of social welfare, and low trust in state institutions. Participation in formal organisations has also fallen from 11% in 2011 to 9% in 2022. Algeria is the only exception where participation in formal organisations was 9% in 2016, rising to 18% in 2019 (year of the uprising) and dropping again to 10% in 2022. In Jordan, participation fell from 6% in 2016 to 4% in 2024, and Egypt dropped from 6% in 2016 to 4% in 2022. Voting in elections has also dropped with various degrees in different countries. For instance, voting in parliamentary elections dropped in Iraq from 83% in 2011 to 45% in 2024. While in Jordan it only dropped from 54% to 51% during the same period. In Egypt, participation in voluntary charity work and activism is lower than 5%, and participation in political parties is even lower than 3%, according to an online survey conducted between March and September 2025.<sup>8</sup>

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ii Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, and Tunisia.

Table 2: MENA citizens' participation in formal politics since 2011

	2011 Arab Barometer Wave II	2016 Arab Barometer Wave IV	2019 Arab Barometer Wave V	2022 Arab Barometer Wave VII	2024 Arab Barometer Wave VIII	2025 RIWI*
<b>% who participate in formal organisations:</b>						
<b>MENA</b>	11%			9%		
<b>Algeria</b>		9%	18%**	10%		
<b>Jordan</b>		6%			4%	
<b>Egypt</b>		6%		4%		
<b>% who vote in parliamentary elections:</b>						
<b>Iraq</b>	83%				45%	
<b>Jordan</b>	54%				51%	
<b>% who participate in voluntary charity work and activism:</b>						
<b>Egypt</b>						<5%
<b>% who participate in political parties</b>						
<b>Egypt</b>						<3%

\* Online survey conducted between March and September 2025 by RIWI.

\*\* Algeria is an outlier, in that participation in formal organisations doubled between 2016 and 2019 – the latter being the year of the uprising. By 2022 however it had plummeted to almost its 2016 level.

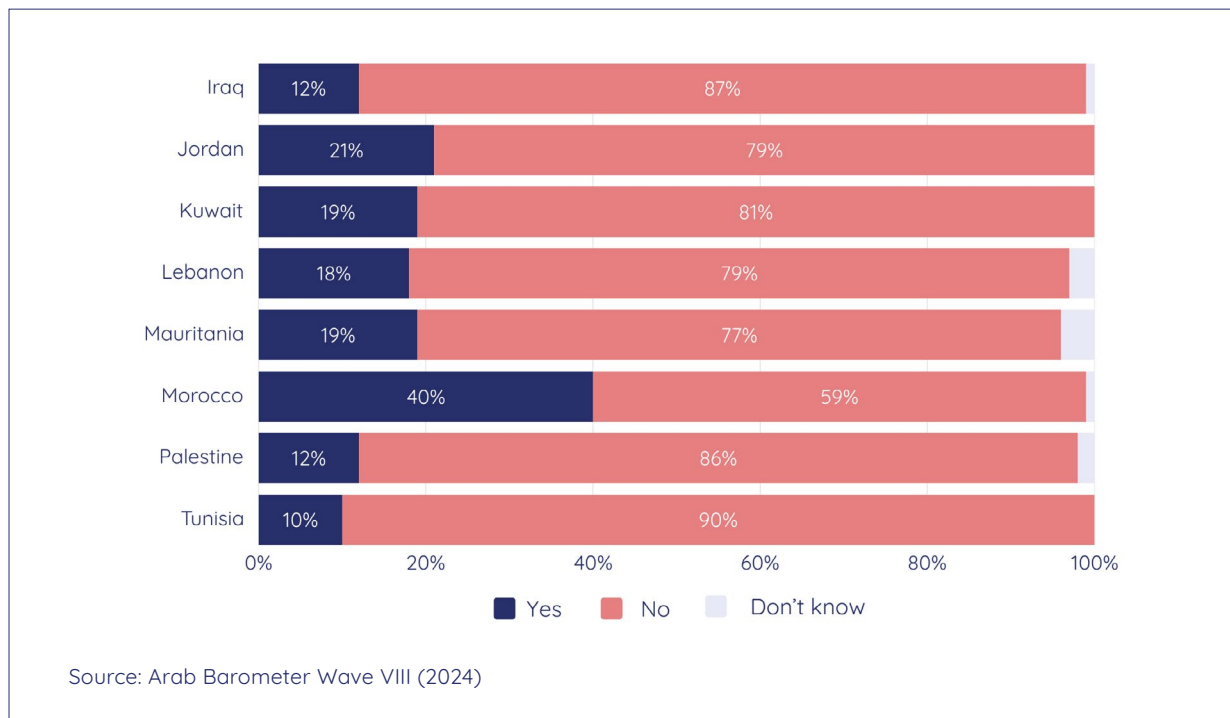
In 2024, the Arab Balometer Wave VIII found that citizens across all the countries studied identified economic challenges as the main cause of their countries' problems, followed by corruption – with the exception of Iraq, where the order of these two problems was reversed.

## Beyond formal politics: mobilisation and contestation

Given the closure of the formal political sphere to all but a small elite, and the daunting socioeconomic pressures since 2009, mobilisation in informal politics has increased. The relationship between these factors has been found in various studies, including:

- In **Iraq**, when citizens were asked in 2023–24 what they thought was the “most effective action to influence a national government decision,” 20% of respondents said it was through their own family’s connections, followed by 17% who said it was by participating in a protest, as found in the Arab Barometer VIII survey.
- In **Egypt**, during my own fieldwork in 2012 and 2015–16, many young people argued that protesting on the street was the only way to get the regime to respond to their grievances or aspirations.<sup>9</sup>
- In **Jordan**, civil society actors gave a similar rationale during my fieldwork in Jordan in 2022, when asked why they contest legal issues and government actions via various mobilisation structures.<sup>10</sup>

Figure 1: Participation in protests, strikes, or boycotts



In the last wave of the Arab Barometer, when asked whether they participated in an in-person protest, demonstration, strike or boycott throughout the past year, 19% of MENA respondents said that they have done so, with the highest levels in Morocco at 40%. When the same question was asked about whether they have done so more than once, the percentages increased enormously, from 2022 to 2024. For instance, in Morocco, 12% said once, and 11% said more than once in 2022, compared to 40% once and 59% more than once in 2024 (figure 1).

This huge increase in activist participation between 2022 and 2024 can mainly be explained by the war on Gaza: many citizens in the region have mobilised and participated in demonstrations against the war. Between October 2023 and October 2025, almost 10,000 sit-ins and 660 marches took place in Morocco calling for an end to the Gaza war and expressing solidarity with Palestinians. These have mostly taken place after Friday prayers; civil society actors – particularly Islamist – organisations have played a significant role in the mobilisation process.<sup>11</sup>

Jordanian activists have also mobilised extensively against the war on Gaza, both in the streets and online. This was largely tolerated; indeed, many parliamentarians also joined the strikes and protest movements. However, in early 2025, when the Muslim Brotherhood organised a demonstration that called on Jordan's government to cut ties with Israel and wage war against it, the government reacted by condemning and repressing activists. While pro-Palestine activism is tolerated in Jordan due to the large number of Palestinians living there, calling for Jordan to wage war against Israel is a red line that, once crossed, instigates state repression and media delegitimisation of activists.<sup>12</sup>

Contrary to Jordan and Morocco, Egypt had very few protest activities against the war on Gaza. Fewer than 5% of respondents to the RIWI Egypt survey had participated in such protest events. This can be explained by the fact that the Egyptian regime has increased its repression of pro-Palestine activism.<sup>13</sup>

# Activism in Morocco, Jordan, Iraq, and Algeria

Zooming in on protest events and contentious activities in Morocco, Jordan, Iraq and Algeria, interesting dynamics can be seen whereby activists have mobilised for both issue-oriented contention and large-scale mobilisation processes. These two types of mobilisation processes have either had an influence on policy change, or have amounted to ‘uprisings’ whose outcome was an overhaul of the government and/or the whole regime. Morocco and Jordan have seen issue-oriented small and large-scale street contention, while Algeria and Iraq have witnessed uprisings based on political reasons, particularly political inclusivity.

In Morocco, the Rif movement (Hirak al-Rif) was triggered in October 2016 when a fish vendor was crushed to death in a garbage truck after trying to retrieve his confiscated fish from the authorities. This sparked an instant street protest calling for better healthcare, education, and infrastructure in the Rif area, which King Hassan V had marginalised since the 1950s. The movement also gained traction elsewhere in the country, making it one of the largest since the 2011 demonstrations. While the regime repressed many of the movement’s leaders, particularly through political trials, it co-opted others by appointing a minister of interior from the Rif area.<sup>14</sup> Smaller demonstrations took place in smaller cities like Jerrada, but these were not large-scale as the case of the Rif.<sup>15</sup>

Most recently in 2025, following the death of five women during failed C-sections in Agadir, the Gen Z 212 movement emerged, which rallied against the failure of the state to provide adequate healthcare for marginalised citizens. This soon sparked larger-scale protests where old slogans like “freedom, dignity and social justice,” which were prevalent during the Arab uprisings, re-appeared.<sup>16</sup> Apart from the crackdown on activists through large-scale detentions, the regime promised to increase spending on welfare by adopting a new finance law and raising its health and education budget by 23% to USD 15.2 billion. The law also promoted some new public sector jobs and included electoral reforms to include more young people and women in the electoral process.<sup>17</sup>

In Jordan, mobilisation and contention have also been most pronounced around socioeconomic issues, most notably the 2018 Dawar Rabe’ (Fourth Circle) demonstrations and the teachers’ demonstrations in 2019. The Dawar Rabe’ demonstrations against the newly modified income-tax law mobilised thousands of participants in Amman, followed by smaller protests in other parts of the country; many organisations mobilised their members to travel to Amman and join the demonstrations and sit-ins. The regime used the usual tactics of repression and concession; the most notable concessions were the prime minister being dismissed and increases in energy prices being suspended.<sup>18</sup> The teachers’ demonstrations were orchestrated by the teachers’ syndicate after public schoolteachers went on strike for over a month in September 2019 to demand a 50% salary increase. In response, the regime repressed syndicate activists and defamed them in the media, catalysing more strikes and solidarity from the public – which, eventually, compelled the regime to grant the salary increase.<sup>19</sup> By 2020, however, the independent teachers’ union was

ordered to shut down, and by 2025, its existence was deemed unconstitutional, forcing it to permanently close.<sup>20</sup>

These measures of repression and concession are clear signs of both citizen discontent with public policy and their inability to channel this discontent through formal political means. Jordan's regime only offered some concessions when citizens mobilised and when repression did not avert them. The final dismantling of the independent teacher's union in 2025 shows the regime's growing uneasiness with independent organisations, which could spiral out of control and reach millions of individuals. Accordingly, the regime is adept at using targeted repression against certain actors to continue dominating the public sphere.

Unlike the socioeconomic, issue-oriented contention in Jordan and Morocco, Algeria and Iraq's recent contentious activities have been large scale. In Iraq in 2019, Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi demoted a general who was popular among the public for defeating Islamic State: a move that activists viewed as a result of Iran's domination. In response, young, low-income Iraqis created the Tishreen movement – and thousands soon joined them. The main slogan of this movement, *nureed watan* (We want a homeland), expresses a grievance felt by many marginalised citizens in Iraq and their desire for a functioning state: beyond sectarian politics, corruption, and clientelism.<sup>21</sup> This was not only the first cross-sectarian movement since the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq;<sup>22</sup> it also led to a change in government – including the ousting of Abdul-Mahdi. Sectarian politics, however, have not changed; indeed, state and militia-led violence against activists has intensified.<sup>iii</sup>

In Algeria, the ruling regime announced that the physically and mentally impaired president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika would run again as a presidential candidate despite his impairment. Bouteflika standing for president was seen as exemplifying the corrupted *pouvoir* (deep state / power). This led to the emergence of the HIRAK movement, which was sparked by anonymous calls on social media that prompted mass, weekly protests on Tuesdays and Fridays.<sup>23</sup> The movement also stood against opposition political parties, which it believed the regime had co-opted. The General Union for Algerian Workers was a crucial actor in the HIRAK movement; its rank-and-file members first mobilised against their own leaders' support of Bouteflika, and then mobilised with HIRAK nationwide. Their support led to a five-day general strike in which production was halted in important industrial complexes – and, more importantly, the hydrocarbon sector was disrupted by massive strikes.<sup>24</sup> The regime, particularly the military, did not directly repress protesters; indeed, a month later, Bouteflika's military abandoned him. This led to the invoking of article 102 of the Algerian constitution, which deemed Bouteflika incapable of ruling for medical reasons.

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iii This paragraph and the following paragraph draw heavily on Nadine Sika, "Youth and the Arab State After the Popular Uprisings: The Interplay between Resistance and Repression," in *The Arab State after the Popular Uprisings: Theoretical and Empirical Reverberations*, edited by Bassel Salloukh, May Darwich, and Ammar Shmeileh (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming).

The military called for a National Dialogue Commission in 2019, in which members of the opposition, the government and the military would have a dialogue to discuss the transitional phase. However, the dialogue was not conducted due to multiple splits within the HIRAK leadership. The movement's credibility decreased when some activists joined the dialogue while others boycotted it.<sup>25</sup> The old regime therefore directed the transitional phase, and the military was very influential in this process. Today, elections have been held, yet the same political elite remains in power.

## Conclusion

This paper has sought to demonstrate the complexities of citizens' participation in autocratic regimes. Citizens' refraining from participating in political and civic institutions reflects their clear understanding that such institutions are embedded in autocratic regimes whose political economy marginalises and excludes them. As a result, participating in these institutions does not bring about the economic, social, and political changes that they aspire to. Citizens' perceptions that their own governments and parliaments are corrupt and do not serve their interests explain their non-participation. While only a small proportion of citizens participate in protest activities and informal organisations, these tactics seem to have an influence on regimes in MENA. Issue-oriented participation, particularly mobilising for wage increases or lower taxes, is more likely to achieve its goals, as when income tax was decreased in Jordan and the public services budget was increased in Morocco. These drastic changes result not from elections but from contention. However, regimes across MENA also resort to concessions, co-optation, and repression to decrease street protests and maintain their grip on power.

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## Notes

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