

Arab Spring Update

By Dr Joel Faulkner Rogers

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Subject-advisors for this report included:

General Lord Richard Dannatt

Sir Jock Stirrup

Sir Malcolm Rifkind

Dr Glen Rangwala

Continued support for protest...

But the focus of reform: less on liberty, more on economic growth/security

As a political idea, the 'Arab Spring' progressed into a testing summer. The sense of collective awakening that characterised simultaneous uprisings across the region between February and April gave way to a news-cycle of stalemates, failed uprisings and fragmented reform-movements from Egypt and Tunisia to Libya, Syria, Bahrain and elsewhere.

To investigate further, we undertook fieldwork from 4th to 14th August 2011 using YouGov's online Middle Eastern panel of 260,000 respondents.

Drawn from a sample size of over 2,000, our results indicate that despite the regional stagnation, Arab public opinion continues to reflect strong pan-regional support for both reform and protest. It is worth noting, however, where the proposed emphasis of this reform lies.

In sixteen out of eighteen countries surveyed for this report, respondents said the top priorities of government should be focused on eliminating corruption and providing stability, employment and economic growth. Political ideals such as equal rights, allowing free speech and organising free and fair elections were consistently ranked lower as priorities.

In other words, a majority of people in the Arab world continue to agitate for reform at a generalised level, but the perceived priority for this reform is less the pursuit of liberal values and more the basic challenges of corruption, economic grievance and provision of basic services.

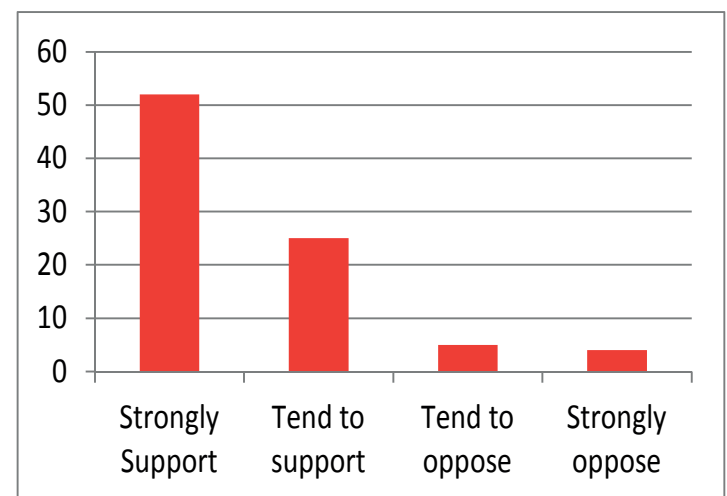
When asked what they saw as the single most important problem facing their country, the consistent answer from respondents of all countries or regions bar one was 'corruption', with the only exception being the 'Arab-Israeli conflict' in the Palestinian Territories. (See graphic on Page 8)

These trends should offer little surprise amidst a brushfire of protests that began in response to a confluence of bad governance, global recession and rising food prices in Tunisia and Egypt.

Map of optimism...

Across 18 countries spanning North Africa, the Levant and member-states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), 77% of respondents said they supported political reform in their country, while 65% supported protests to achieve this end, with little variation in majorities according to gender, age or income bracket.

These sentiments accompany an inherent optimism in many parts, notes Dr Glen Rangwala of the POLIS Department at Cambridge University, about the future of political reform and empowerment in respondents' own countries. In North Africa, where upheaval has seen the most success in upturning the status-quo, 71% of all respondents believe they will have more power to impact the decisions of government over the next year and 65% predict they will have more freedom to criticize government. In Egypt, these majorities rise to 92% and 89% respectively, suggesting that international pessimism about the pace of progress in the country is less reflected among the country's own population. Even among the Levant and Gulf regions, where attempted uprisings have consistently stalled or failed, we find similar patterns of opinion, albeit reduced: 67% of Levantine respondents believe their power to impact government will increase in the coming year, while 59% of Gulf residents say the same.



To what extent do you support or oppose political reform in your country?

Signs of less Western democracy

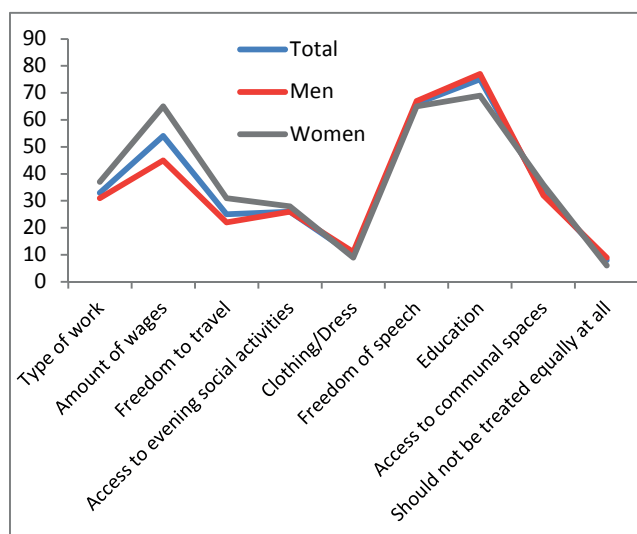
While survey results indicate a generalised appetite for political reform, they also portray a wide range of mainstream attitudes and expressions of social conservatism that would seem illiberal to many Western observers. For instance:

- Consistent majorities of 70%-plus in North Africa and the Gulf states say the government should make law based on religion. A smaller number but still an overall majority of respondents living in the Levant say the same.
- In half of the eighteen countries surveyed for this report, respondents stated that religion was the most important quality of a political leader beyond their policies, making it more important than education, experience, ethnic identity and personality.
- A strong majority of all countries and demographic groups agreed that a person should be punished for converting out of Islam, with a regional average of just over 60% across North Africa, the Levant and the Gulf states, and an overall majority of 66% among all respondents.
- Within that majority, 53% believe the suitable punishment for leaving Islam should be the death penalty.
- 39% say it should include deportation from the country of residence, the removal of citizen-rights such as voting or exile from the local community. There is little variation in these numbers by either income or age.

In which of the following areas of life do you think men and women should be treated equally?

By the same token, results show consistently low levels of support for the idea that women and men should be treated equally across a range of areas, including type of work, freedom to travel, access to evening/social activities, clothing/dress, and access to communal spaces (e.g. cafes and libraries).

Notably, these results portrayed small differences between the responses of men and women.



- Where 31% of male respondents said that women should be treated equally in the type of work they can do, only 37% of female respondents said the same.
- Similarly, where 25% of male respondents said that women should have equal freedom to travel, just 31% of female respondents agreed.

There were also three areas in which fewer female respondents supported equal treatment for woman than their male counterparts.

- Where 11% of men said that women should have equal right to choose how they dress, just 9% of women said the same.
- Freedom of speech and education showed a similar reversal of trends, which, interestingly, were the only areas in which a majority of respondents support equal treatment of women overall, along with the amount of wages people earn.

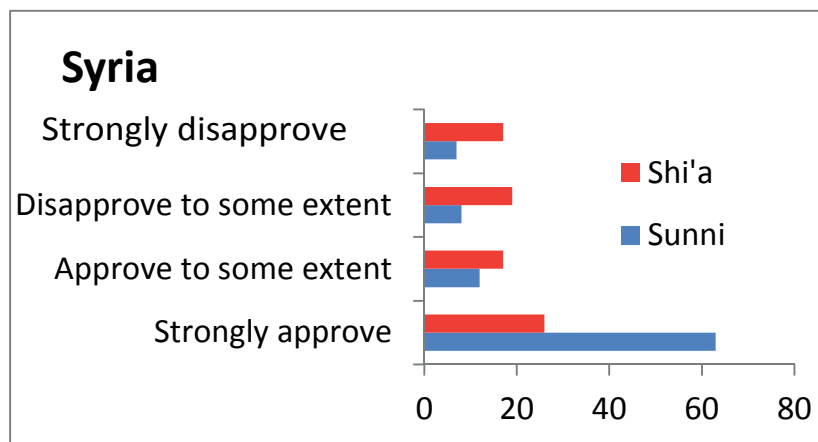
The dark side of Arab empowerment: sectarian division

As Sir Jock Stirrup and General Lord Richard Dannatt both emphasised in their commentary on these results, arguably more than expanding Islamism, it is sectarian division that represents the darker geopolitical potential of popular forces being unleashed by the Arab Spring.

Support for those protesting in other countries, including Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen and Jordan, retains largely similar, sympathetic majorities among respondents, regardless of being Muslim or non-Muslim, Shi'a or Sunni.

In two instances, however, results belie a deeper issue for the region at large, with stark differences between Shi'a and Sunni support for the same uprising.

- In the case of Syria, 75% of Sunni respondents support the protests while only 43% of Shi'a say the same.
- In the case of Bahrain, 70% of Shi'a respondents support the protests while only 33% of Sunnis say the same.



To what extent do you approve or disapprove of those people who have been protesting in the following countries?

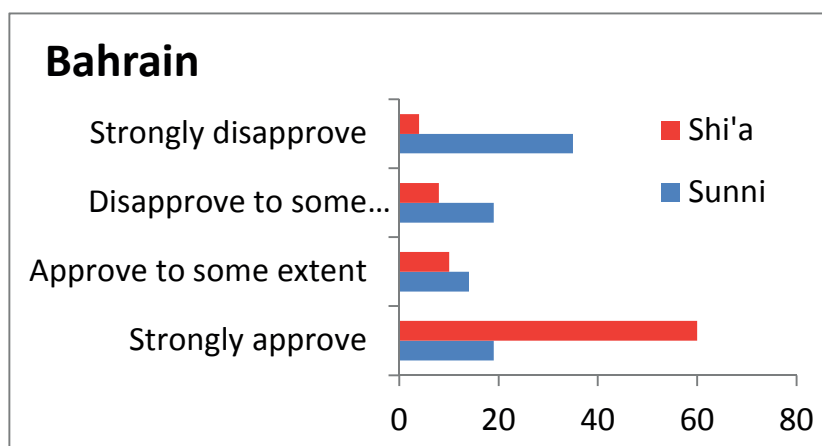
At a superficial level, these majorities simply match the religious sect of respondents with those driving the protests in question.

At a deeper level, however, the differences reflect a broader set of geopolitical dynamics that could turn the Arab Spring from a story of 'people-power' to 'power struggle' among autocratic governments.

The divide between Sunni and Shi'a Islam is a fault-line that runs throughout the region, and still bears the imprint of Colonial eras, when European powers tended to co-opt selected minorities into positions of administrative privilege.

Sectarian tensions have been most obvious in the Spring protests as they've developed in Syria, where the Alawite minority – a sect that developed from Shi'ism – rules over a majority Sunni population now vying in parts to overthrow the country's President, Bashar al-Assad. The conflict has already absorbed sectarian overtones with accusations of religious cleansing from both sides.

In due course, the various pockets of Middle Eastern unrest have helped to unsettle established power-balances between Shi'a and Sunni communities that were heretofore kept in place by seemingly stable autocracies.



To what extent do you approve or disapprove of those people who have been protesting in the following countries?

- Sunni communities have grown restless in both Syria and Iraq, where they constitute between 15-20% of the population.
- Shiite communities have used the wider backdrop of pro-democracy protests to call for greater rights in Lebanon (where Shiites constitute around 55% of the population), in Bahrain (75% of the population approx), in Saudi Arabia (15% of the population approx) and in Yemen (40% of the population approx).

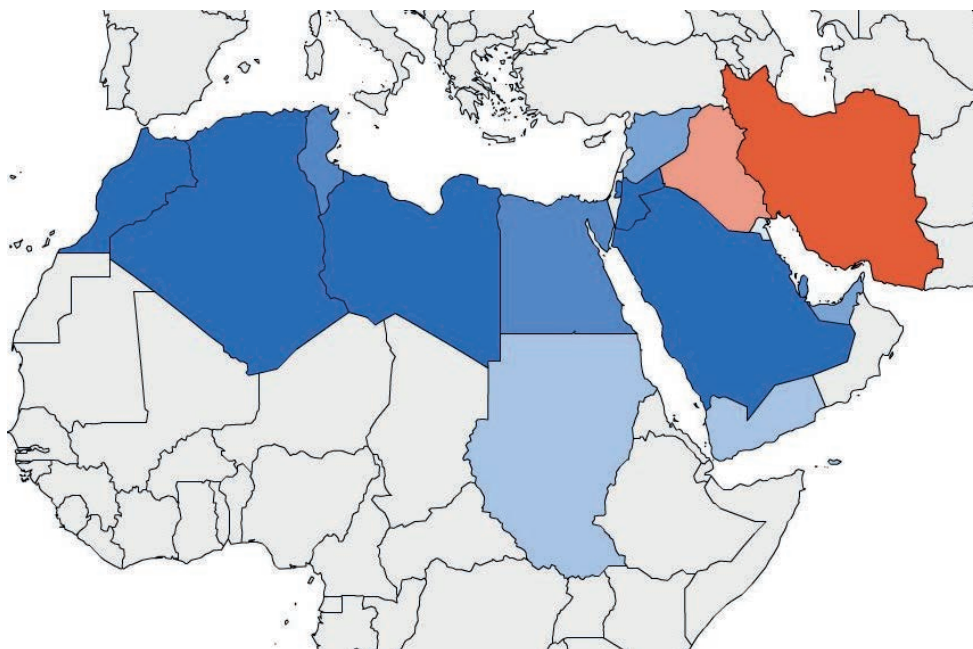
Both Sunni and Shi'a sects have an active regional sponsor in Saudi Arabia and Iran respectively, who each fear the encroaching influence of the other. The fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq left Saudi rulers in a heightened state of insecurity towards the newly empowered Shi'a majority (70% of the population approx) and thus the geo-strategic opportunities this provided for Iran.

Saudi insecurity found its expression most notably among this year's uprisings in Bahrain, where fears of a new strategic base for Tehran in the Gulf led to a diplomatic scramble on the peninsula and the combined deployment of 1500 troops from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to help suppress the protests. The Saudis even threatened war with Iran to defend the island, with little public opposition from the United States, for whom Bahrain provides a home to the US Navy's 5th Fleet, and therefore also a bulwark against Iranian power in the Gulf.

In Syria, the situation is reversed, where the Alawite government is fundamental to Iran's interests, providing its leaders with port-access to the Mediterranean and the capacity to harass Israel through sponsorship of Hezbollah, the politico-military Shiite organisation based in Lebanon.

In summary, a possible outcome of the uprisings could be the intensification of sectarian tensions that ultimately draw in regional and global powers and leave the region less tolerant and stable than it was before.

Sunni/Shia Majorities in North Africa and the Middle East



Majority Sunni



Majority Shiite

More Islam, less extremism...

Clearly, the long-term effects of recent turbulence on the Arab Street remain uncertain. But whatever emerges will likely reflect three outcomes: an increased role for political Islam, a backlash against closer relations with Israel and little regional improvement for the tarnished Western brand.

In each case, however, these trends need clarification beyond widespread international concern that the Arab Spring will herald an 'Islamist takeover' of the region.

Initial survey results this year indicate that these concerns are overstated:

- In Egypt, for example, just 40% of respondents described themselves as favourable towards the Muslim Brotherhood, while 55% were unfavourable.
- Al-Wasat, a religious party broadly characterised as 'liberal' and 'centrist' was viewed favourably by only 36%.
- When respondents were asked to select their preferred choice for Egypt's new leader from a list of eight possible candidates, the top three received a combined 70% of the vote, none of whom represent the Brotherhood. (Overall winner was Amr Moussa, former Secretary-General of the Arab League, with 49% of support, followed by Ahmed Zewail, the Nobel scientist, with 12%, and Omar Suleiman, the former intelligence chief and briefly Vice President, with 9%)



Meanwhile, regional figures from YouGov polling throughout this year show that support for fundamentalist groups such as al Qaeda and the act of using violence to defend Islam continues to wane among a majority of the population, who perceive that militants are, for the most part, killing civilians, and most of them Muslims.

As Sir Malcolm Rifkind advised in the production of this report, the emergence of a pluralist society inevitably brings with it a spectrum of beliefs and views, and "it would frankly be strange in Muslim countries if we saw something different" from a resurgence of religion in public-political discourse.

It remains to be seen, however, if Islam will be "the determining factor" in mainstream politics for countries like Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, or merely one of several emergent forces. Even if it is, Rifkind adds, this does not necessarily imply a threat, either internally or externally.

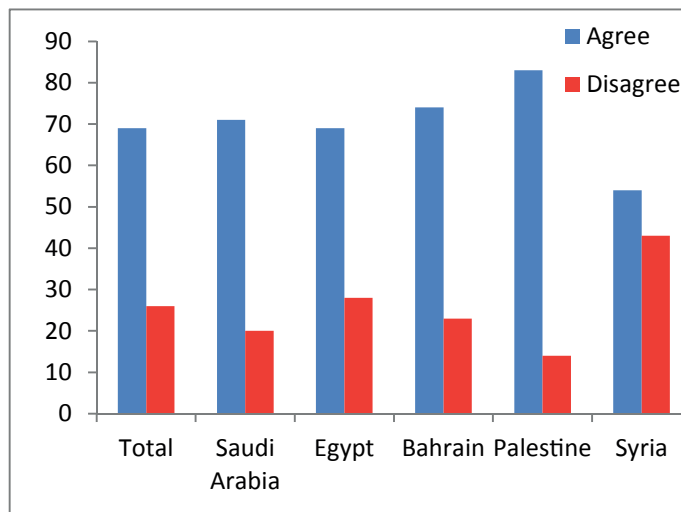
Arab-Israeli Conflict not a top priority and little change for the Western brand...

In attitudes to the wider world, our findings highlighted two key themes.

First, and unsurprisingly, strong levels of anti-Israeli sentiment are pan-regional and pan-demographic (excluding non-Muslim minorities such as Hindu, Sikh, Christian and, of course, Jewish), with 76% saying the Arab World should not accept Israel's right to exist.

It should be clarified, however, that as an issue, the Arab-Israeli conflict ranked comparatively low on the list of perceived problems facing respondents' own countries. Out of six issues, the Arab-Israeli conflict was ranked overall in fifth place, making it less important than corruption, the economy, unrest caused by militants and foreign interference by Western countries.

Second, the various trends and developments surrounding the Arab Spring have so far done little to promote positive perceptions of Western power. A majority think the U.S. and Europe will benefit more than the Arab people generally from the civil unrest this year, with 69% of all respondents also saying the influence of Western culture has been harmful.



To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?
'The influence of Western culture has been harmful'.

Younger + poorer = more religious + more anti-Western/anti-Israeli

As the figures also indicate, being younger and poorer in the Arab World is likely to make you more religious, more anti-Western and more anti-Israeli.

The probability of believing the government should make laws based on religion, for example, increases as respondents get younger: 57% of those over 40 support laws being made based on religion, while the figure rises to 66% for those between ages 35-39, then to 73% for ages 30-34 and to 74% for ages 18-29. Similarly, the difference between highest and lowest income groups shows a respective increase of 8% among those who agree, from 67-75%. Among those who say the influence of Western culture has been harmful, the difference between highest and lowest income brackets shows a respective increase of 6% among those who agree, from 64-70%, and a similar increase of 6% from oldest to youngest age groups, from 65-71%. Similar increases for the lowest income and age brackets can be found for those who think religion is the most important quality of a leader beyond their policies and the claim that Israel does not have the right to exist.

Closing thought: the 'net-effect' of digital democracy – and its limits...

In the wider context, these results suggest a broad caveat to Western optimism about the transformative power of social crowds and their new hand-maiden: modern communications-technology.

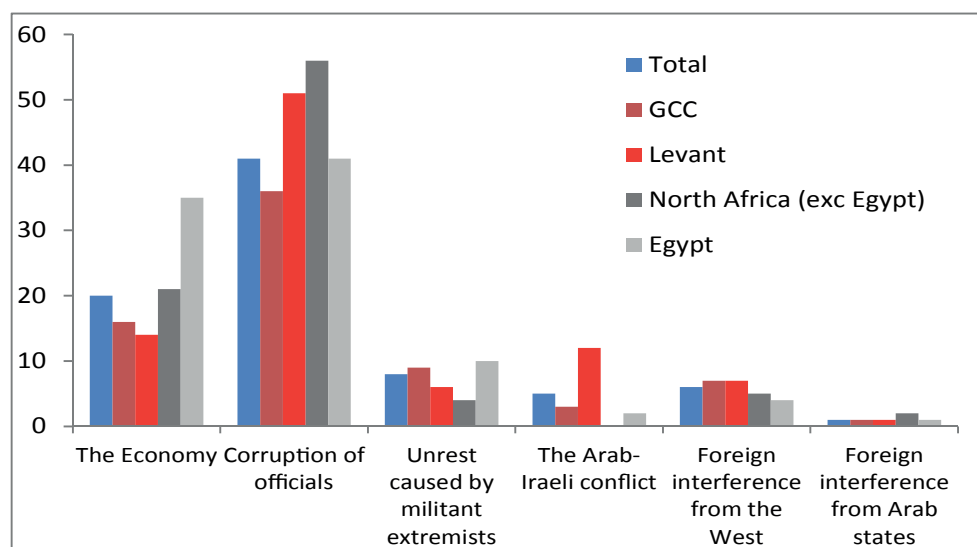
As this report contends, the expansion of people-power in the Arab World also likely means the expansion of principles and values inimical to the traditional motifs of Western liberal order, from social codes of shame and honour to gender inequality and the relationship between church and state.

Cheerleaders of the social media revolution have naturally lauded its ability to empower a new, collective voice against the forces of illiberalism and bad governance. The ability to muster overnight collective action, however, should not be confused with a capacity to transmit Western definitions of civic society along fibre-optic cables.

As Johns Hopkins Professor Michael Mandelbaum observes, democracy as defined in Western political philosophy is really a fusion of two separate traditions. First is the rule of the people, as exercised through elections, which are relatively easy to stage. The second is liberty, a more uniquely Western brand, which is far more difficult to establish and maintain, since it requires institutions.

If European history is any guide, these institutions take years to build, emerging only organically over time to the point that they are capable of sustaining core liberal pillars, such as a fully independent legal system, freedom of worship, rights to free speech and social equality.

In practice, as this polling study implies, the online empowerment of social crowds beyond the West is unlikely to herald collective convergence around any corpus of universal values. A more certain effect is the release of new 'social energies' that challenge the norms and institutions of international society that have characterised Western expansion over the last sixty years.



What, if anything, do you see as the most important problem facing your country?