البارومیتر العربي
ARAB BAROMETER

CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA



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Executive Summary

Arab Barometer's Wave IX survey, fielded in 2025 and 2026, included a new battery of questions about the role civil society plays in countries across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the issues citizens want it to address. The limited visibility of civil society in the region is evident in the large share of citizens who say it plays no role in their country or who cannot identify a role it plays. Together with stagnant or declining trust and low levels of organizational membership across the region, this finding suggests that civil society has not fulfilled the role many envisioned for it after the Arab uprisings. At the same time, the findings point to ways civil society can be more effective in meeting the expectations of citizens. Across the region, citizens overwhelmingly prefer civil society to address immediate material needs rather than political or cultural issues. A focus on meeting these needs can improve well-being and is associated with substantially higher trust in civil society. Further, building trust is important in the long run, particularly if civil society is to expand beyond these areas. While trust built on meeting these needs does not come from political engagement, results from Arab Barometer suggest that differences in levels of trust in civil society are linked with views of democracy. As such, strengthening organizations that initially focus on material needs may ultimately serve a broader purpose that could influence views of governance structures. Those seeking to more directly promote political engagement through civil society could also adapt their models to the actions citizens view as effective at producing political change within the unique context of their own country.

The data also suggest that restrictions on the space in which civil society organizations operate have led them to be perceived primarily as a vehicle for service provision and humanitarian assistance. Arab Barometer findings reinforce the picture of a region where civil society is most visible in these roles, when it is visible at all. Perhaps as a result, Arab publics also largely prefer that civil society focus on service provision. Citizens appear to recognize the constraints under which these organizations operate and thus prefer civil society organizations to focus on directly improving material conditions. These limits are reflected in patterns of trust in civil society, engagement with it, and citizens' stated preferences for alternative avenues for influencing political change.

Over the past decade, trust in civil society across MENA has been closely tied to the extent to which citizens' material challenges have been met. Amid repeated crises that civil society and other actors have been unable to fully address, trust has declined or stagnated across much of the region. Where citizens feel satisfied with the provision of basic services, however, trust has increased. The most dramatic increase in this trust came in Morocco in 2024, when Moroccans reported overwhelmingly positive evaluations of civil society's response to the 2023 Al Haouz earthquake. This finding highlights the significance of under-

standing citizens' preferences and expectations in improving public opinion of not only civil society but also other institutions as well. The public largely judges an institution based on its success in the role citizens expect it to play, not necessarily the role the institution's backers pursue. When civil society is perceived as a means for service provision and humanitarian aid, an organization focused on political or cultural issues may struggle to gain trust even if it demonstrates significant competency in these areas.

Trust in civil society also tracks closely with trust in government, suggesting that successful service provision by civil society may bolster perceptions of the government's ability to meet material needs. This close relationship between evaluation of government services and trust in civil society is notable even if it does not have explanatory power. It at least suggests that views of civil society are not divorced from views of government in general. The implication is that citizens either expect the two institutions to play broadly similar roles or at least are evaluating both institutions on a largely overlapping set of outcomes or criteria.

Although civil society's constrained role has likely contributed to limited formal organizational membership, Arab Barometer findings suggest that trusted civil society is linked to greater informal engagement. About a decade ago, citizens with higher socioeconomic status (SES), who are often expected to take greater interest in political reform or cultural activities, were substantially more likely than those with lower SES to belong to organizations in several countries. Since then, membership among higher-SES citizens has declined, and the gaps have largely disappeared. Combined with the limited relationship between membership trends and changes in public trust, this pattern is consistent with citizens in MENA increasingly viewing civil society as a service to evaluate rather than a cause to join. However, Arab Barometer results show that greater trust in civil society is more strongly associated with informal civic engagement than with formal organizational membership.

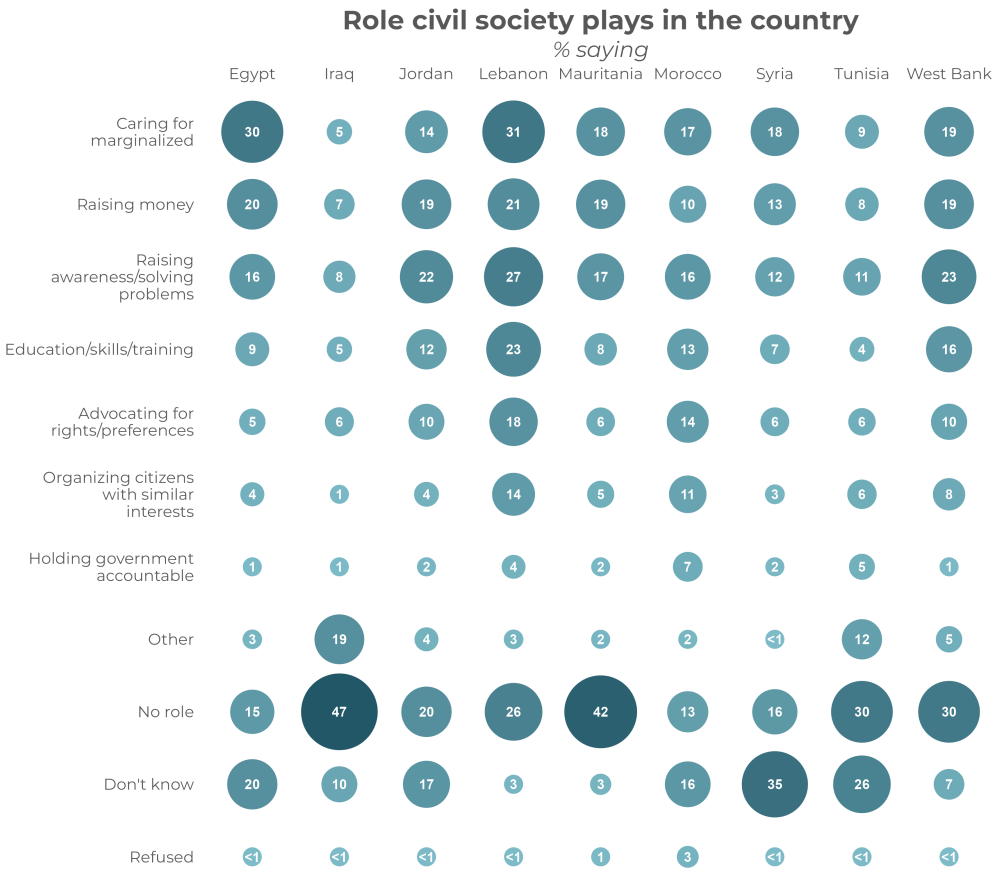
These constraints limit the pathways through which civil society is typically expected to support democratization. Nonetheless, the findings identify ways civil society may directly and indirectly shape public views of democracy. Trust in civil society is associated with more positive evaluations of the performance of democratic systems, although several causal explanations are possible. By encouraging informal civic engagement, civil society may also lead citizens to define democracy more in terms of the processes emphasized in academic literature than in terms of the outcomes that citizens across MENA often prioritize.

These are among the main findings of nine nationally representative public opinion surveys conducted across the Middle East and North Africa as part of Arab Barometers Wave IX in 2025-2026. The results include more than 11,000 interviews across the region and have a margin of error of ±3 points or less in

each country. Overall, these results provide clear insight into the changing nature of civil society in the region today.

Civil Society in MENA: Perceived Roles and Visibility

Findings from the 2025-2026 survey portray civil society as either largely absent from public view or concentrated in service provision and humanitarian assistance. When asked what role civil society plays, many across the region cannot identify a specific role. In Iraq, Syria, and Tunisia, more than half say either that they do not know what role civil society plays or that it plays no role in their country. In Mauritania, the combined share is 45 percent. Elsewhere, roughly a third do not identify it as playing any specific role. This outcome implies limited public understanding or visibility of civil society's work across the region.



Arab Barometer Wave IX (2025-2026)

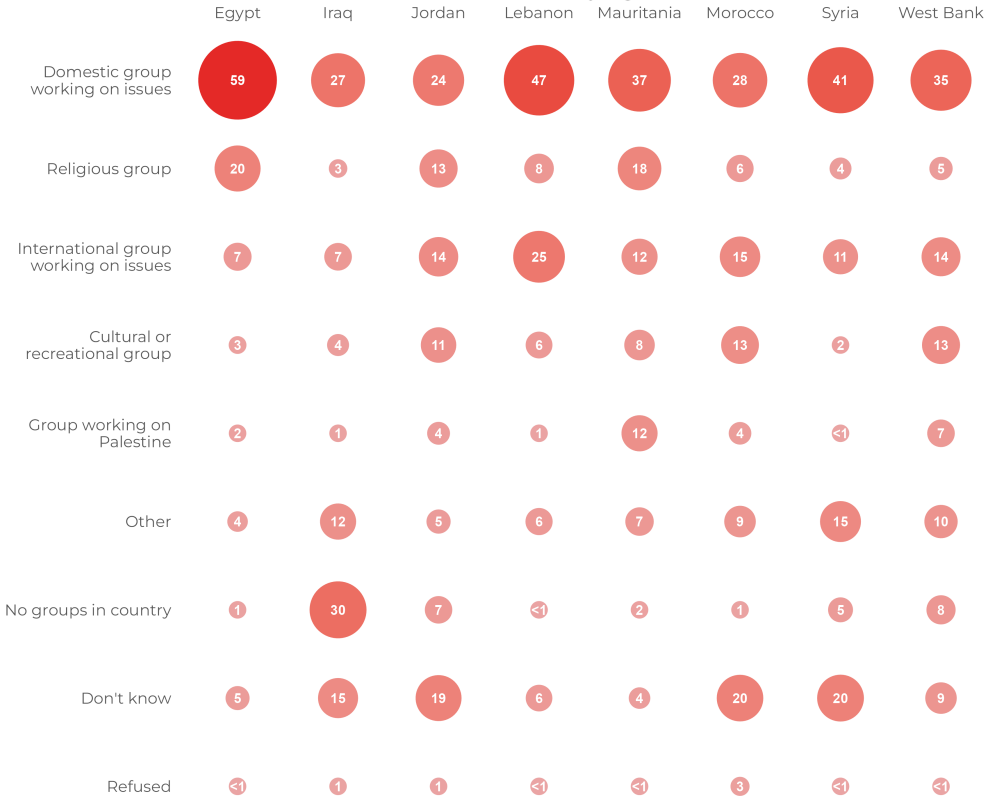
Among those who identify civil society as playing a role in their country, the most common perceptions are providing support or services, raising awareness, or promoting education. These service-oriented functions are cited much more often than advocating for rights, organizing groups with similar interests, or holding the government accountable. The precise mix varies considerably across countries, and no country has a single overwhelmingly dominant role. For example, about three-in-ten say caring for the marginalized in Egypt and Lebanon, but elsewhere it is 19 percent or less. In the case of Morocco, between 10 and 17 percent say caring for the marginalized, raising money for causes, raising awareness or solving problems, providing education or skills development, advocating for rights, or organizing similar interests. Ultimately, the key pattern is diversity of perceptions both within and across countries. Additionally, few consistent differences emerge by income, education, or age.

To gain greater insight into this question, Arab Barometer included an open-ended question allowing respondents to describe how they understood the role of civil society in their own words. An analysis of their responses reveals a similar pattern. The most common terms in their answers include spreading awareness, gathering donations, support, offering help, and education. These concepts point to a view of civil society as filling gaps in services rather than focusing on government accountability or arts and culture. The most common term, support, appears in only eight percent of responses, underscoring the diversity of the specific services citizens associate with civil society.

When citizens who could identify a role for civil society were asked to name an example of a civil society organization, a similarly diverse picture of civil society across MENA emerges. First, in several countries, at least one-in-five say that no such organizations exist in their country or that they cannot name one. This result again highlights the general problem of limited visibility or public understanding for civil society in these countries. However, among those who do name an example of a civil society group, domestic groups addressing local or national issues are the most commonly cited examples in all countries surveyed. Meanwhile, religious groups are also named relatively often in some countries, while cultural or recreational groups rarely come to mind.

Example of a civil society organization

% saying

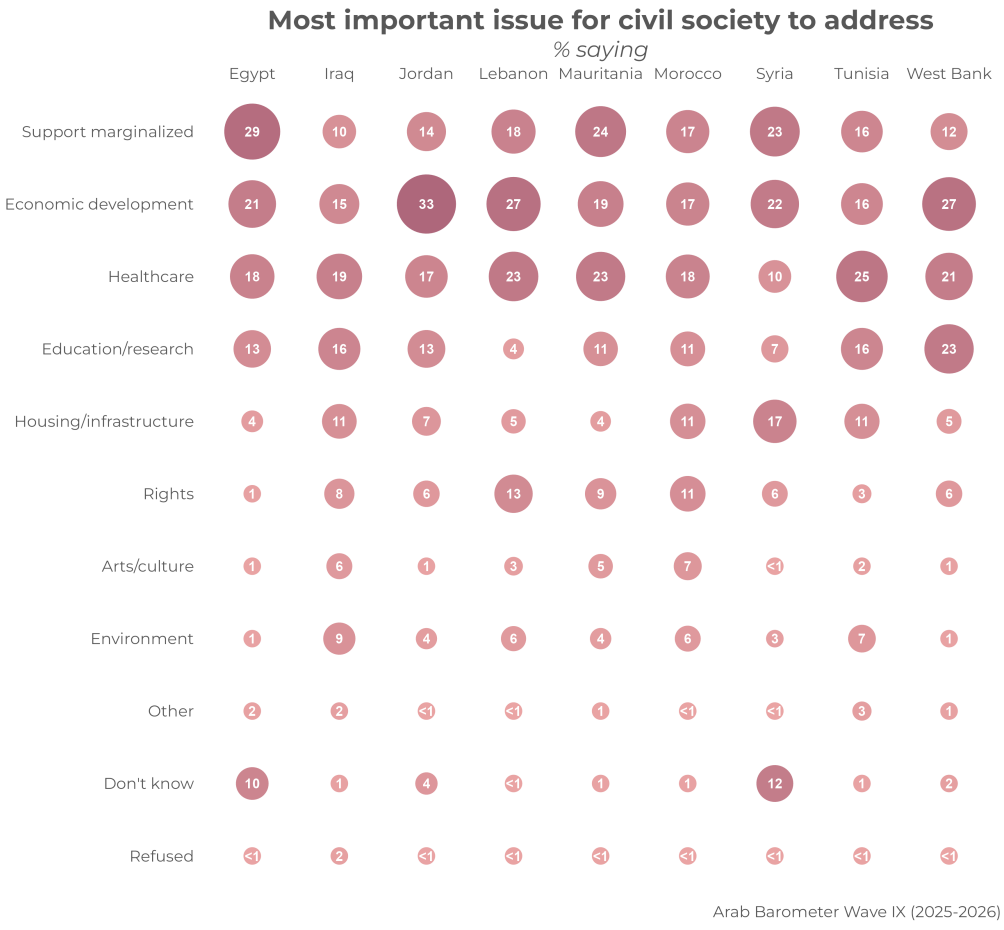


Arab Barometer Wave IX (2025-2026)

When asked to name a specific example of a civil society organization, an analysis of open-ended responses provides additional insight into the types of organizations associated with civil society. International organizations that operate across multiple countries appear more often than any single local organization. The Red Crescent and Red Cross, Caritas Internationalis, and Doctors Without Borders stand out among such groups, but even the most common names appear in only around six percent of responses, demonstrating the wide diversity of organizations identified. Among local examples, charitable or religious organizations that provide services or raise awareness are relatively common. However, the broad mandates of the named organizations make it difficult to classify them into more detailed categories.

Public Preferences for Civil Society

Although citizens across MENA often struggle to identify a civil society organization, they do express clearer preferences about what civil society should address in their country. At most about one-in-ten in both Egypt and Syria say they do not know which issue civil society should prioritize while the share is lower elsewhere in the region. In other words, many citizens can identify a role for civil society even when they cannot identify what it currently does in their country. The findings point to potential demand for organizations that would be able to respond to these priorities.



Arab Barometer Wave IX (2025-2026)

Across the region, citizens want civil society to focus on improving material conditions—including supporting marginalized groups, economic development, healthcare, and housing and infrastructure —rather than rights advocacy or support for arts and culture. The preferred issue varies within and across countries. Supporting marginalized groups is at least tied for the most common response in Egypt (29 percent), Mauritania (24 percent), and Syria (23 percent), while economic development ranks first in the West Bank (27 percent), Jordan (33 percent), and Lebanon (27 percent). Healthcare is the most commonly selected issue in Tunisia (25 percent) while it is effectively tied for first in Morocco (18 percent). In Mauritania, healthcare is also a leading priority (23 percent), as is economic development in Syria (22 percent). Citizens in the West Bank are relatively more likely than those elsewhere to want civil society to focus on education and research (23 percent) while healthcare is also commonly cited (21 percent). In Syria, which endured a brutal internal conflict, many select housing and infrastructure (17 percent). In short, these findings have common underlying themes but also underscore the diversity of preferences across countries based on local conditions. Creating a vibrant civil society in MENA today that is engaged with citizens thus requires careful attention to these differences across countries.

Perhaps surprisingly, there are no consistent demographic differences for preferences about the role civil society should play in the country. The clearest is by education: more educated citizens are more likely to prioritize education and research, while less educated citizens are generally more likely to prioritize support for marginalized groups. Differences by income and age are neither large nor consistent across the region.

Trust in Civil Society

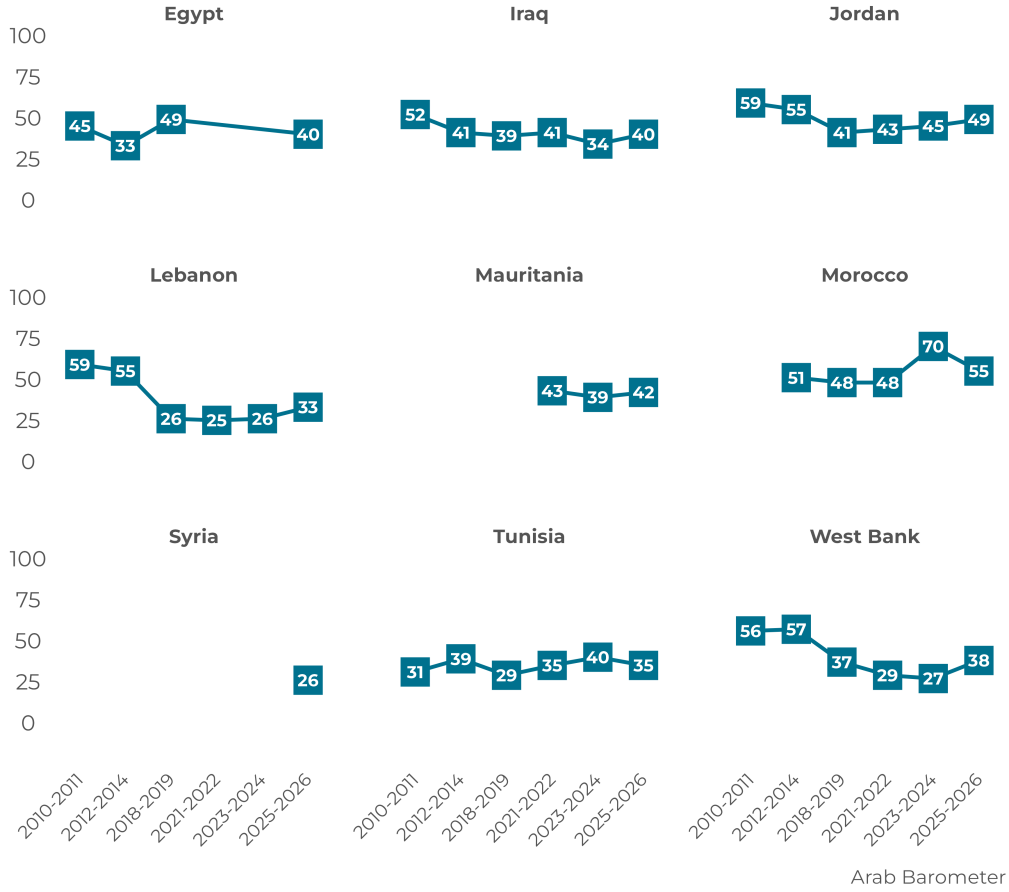
The fact that civil society is largely confined to service provision could suggest a broad disinterest in political issues. However, it is possible that these preferences partly reflect judgments about the relative effectiveness of civil society as a route to political influence, particularly as many countries across the region have placed restrictions on political organizations. As a result, citizens appear to associate civil society with areas where it is proving more effective.

A clear trend across Arab Barometer surveys is that trust in civil society has generally declined or stagnated across MENA over the past decade. Yet, this has not been the case in all countries. Evidence from Morocco demonstrates that civil society's effective response to emergency situations can shape levels of confidence. Data from Arab Barometer reveal that Moroccans viewed the actions of civil society organizations following the September 2023 Al Haouz earthquake particularly positively. Arab Barometer surveyed Moroccans a few months after this tragic event. Compared with 2022, the share of Moroccans who say

they trust civil society rose from 48 percent to 70 percent. Although trust fell by 2025, it remained above the pre-earthquake level. Morocco has the highest level of trust in the region and, among countries with a pre-2015 comparison, is the only case where trust is now higher. In Lebanon, by contrast, trust in civil society fell sharply between 2014 and 2019, mirroring declines in trust in many other institutions. Overall, current levels of trust in the region remain below those recorded in the first half of the previous decade shortly after the Arab Spring.

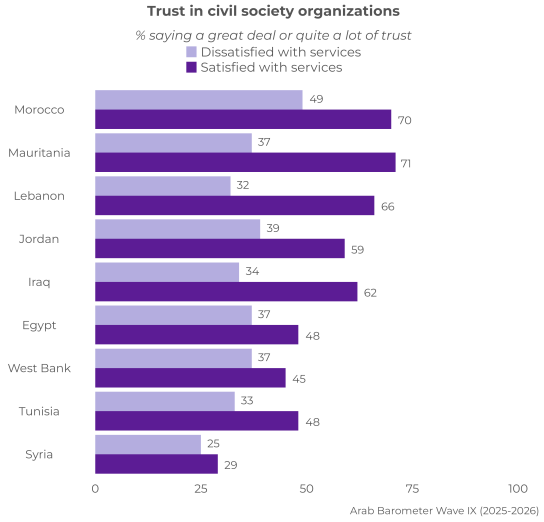
Trust in civil society organizations

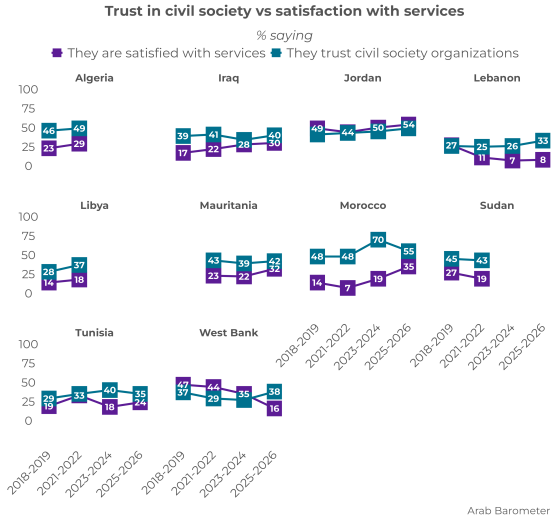
% saying a great deal or quite a lot of trust



Comparing trust in civil society with evaluations of public services reinforces the view that citizens assess civil society primarily through service provision. In every country surveyed in 2025-2026, citizens who indicated they were satisfied or completely satisfied with five services—education, healthcare, trash collection, electricity, and water supply —were also more likely to say they had a

great deal or quite a lot of trust in civil society organizations. The gap reaches 20 points or more in several countries. Trends over time confirm this relationship at the country level while also demonstrating its limits. Looking at the two services asked about in all waves over the last decade —healthcare and education —trust in civil society generally rises and falls with satisfaction with these services. Citizens do not appear to hold civil society solely responsible for severe collapses in service provision, such as those in Lebanon since 2022 or in the West Bank more recently. Conversely, when civil society addresses a specific material need outside the scope of these services, as it did after the 2023 earthquake in Morocco, trust can rise sharply even when broader service evaluations do not. Trust in civil society and quality of service provision are not always linked, but more often than not they move in tandem.

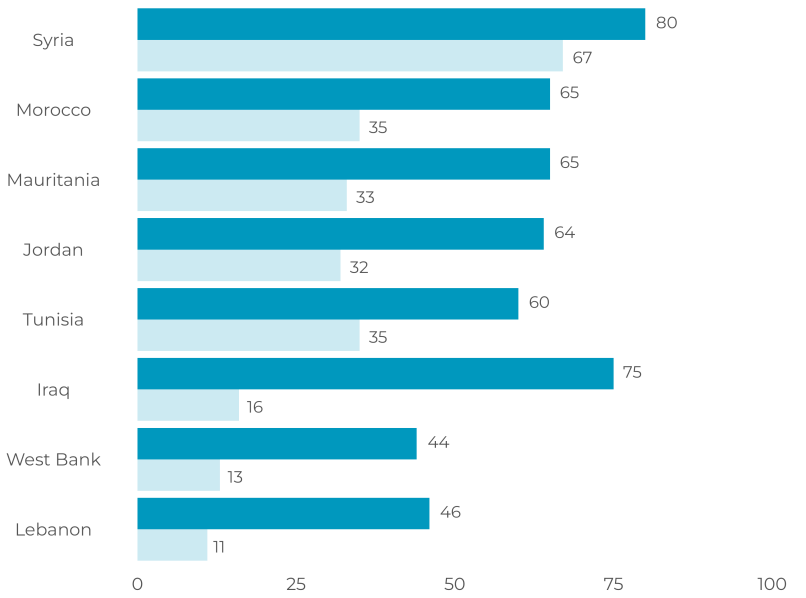




Results from Arab Barometer also show a close association between trust in civil society and trust in government. In 2025-2026, citizens who trust civil society are more likely to trust the government in every country surveyed where the question was asked. In Syria, this gap is the smallest at 13 points, while the gap is at least 25 points elsewhere. This relationship also holds over time: during the past decade, trust in government has tracked closely with trust in civil society organizations. As with service evaluations, however, the association has limits. In Lebanon, trust in government fell more sharply amid the economic collapse than trust in civil society. In Morocco, the increase in trust in civil society following the earthquake was not accompanied by a comparable increase in trust in government. While these findings do not establish causality, they do paint a picture of a regional context where civil society not only occupies a role similar to the one citizens believe government should fulfill but also may actually affect the ability of the government to meet their expectations.

Trust in the government

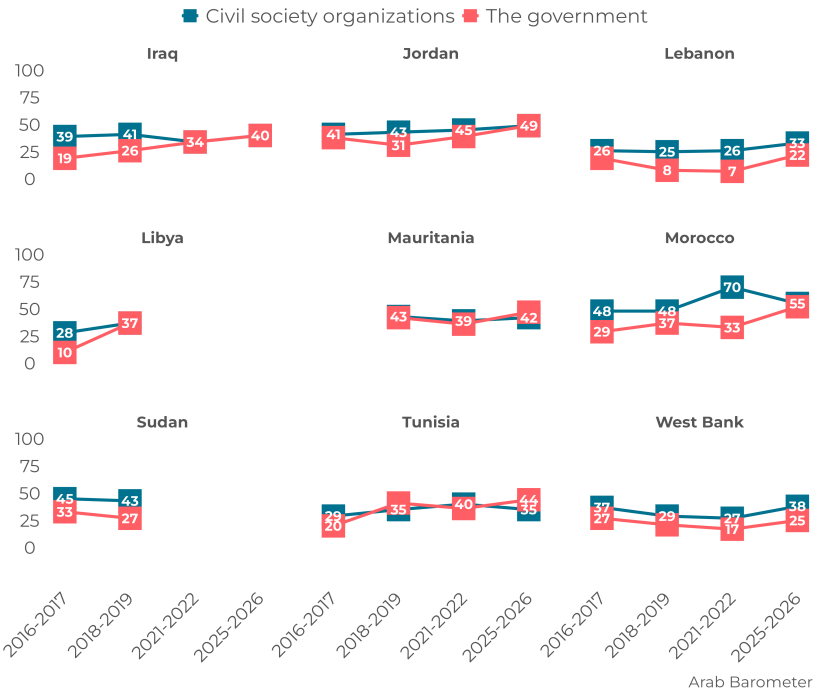
% saying a great deal or quite a lot of trust in the government



Arab Barometer Wave IX (2025-2026)

Trust in institutions

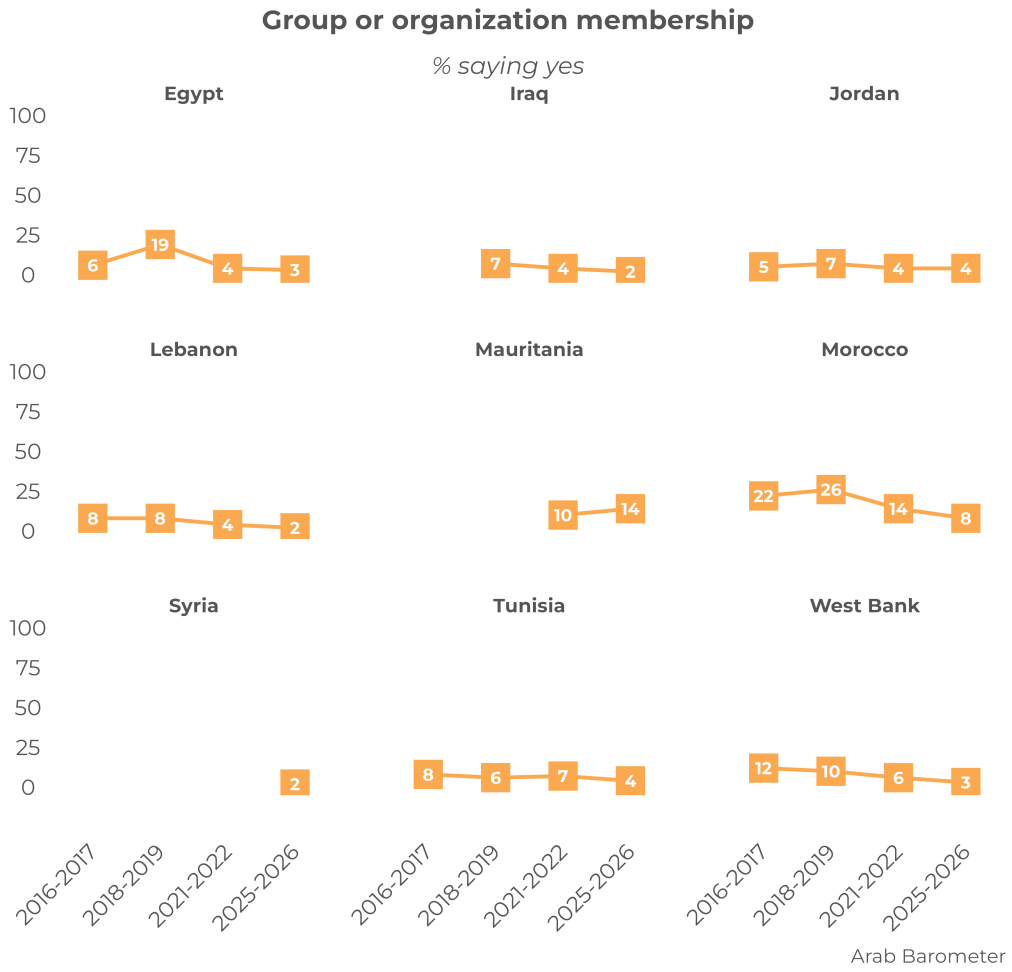
% saying that they have a great deal or quite a lot of trust in:



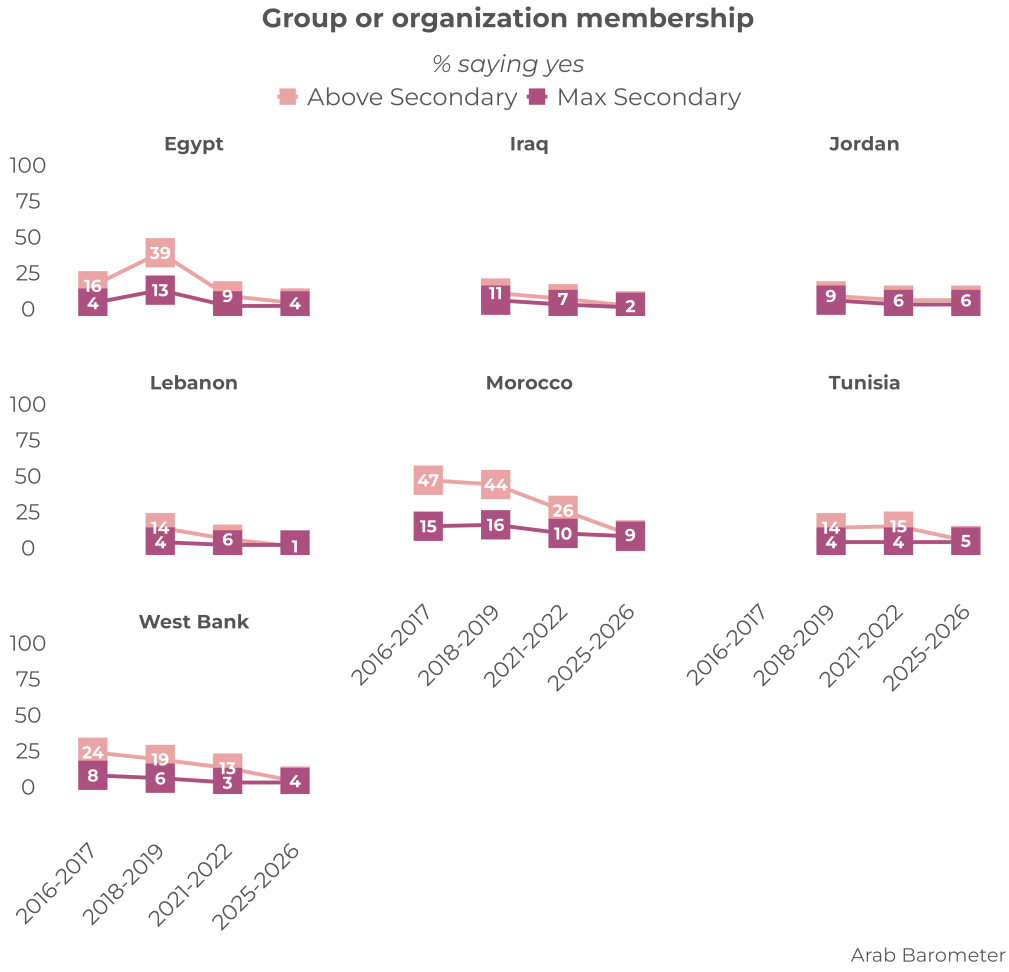
Arab Barometer

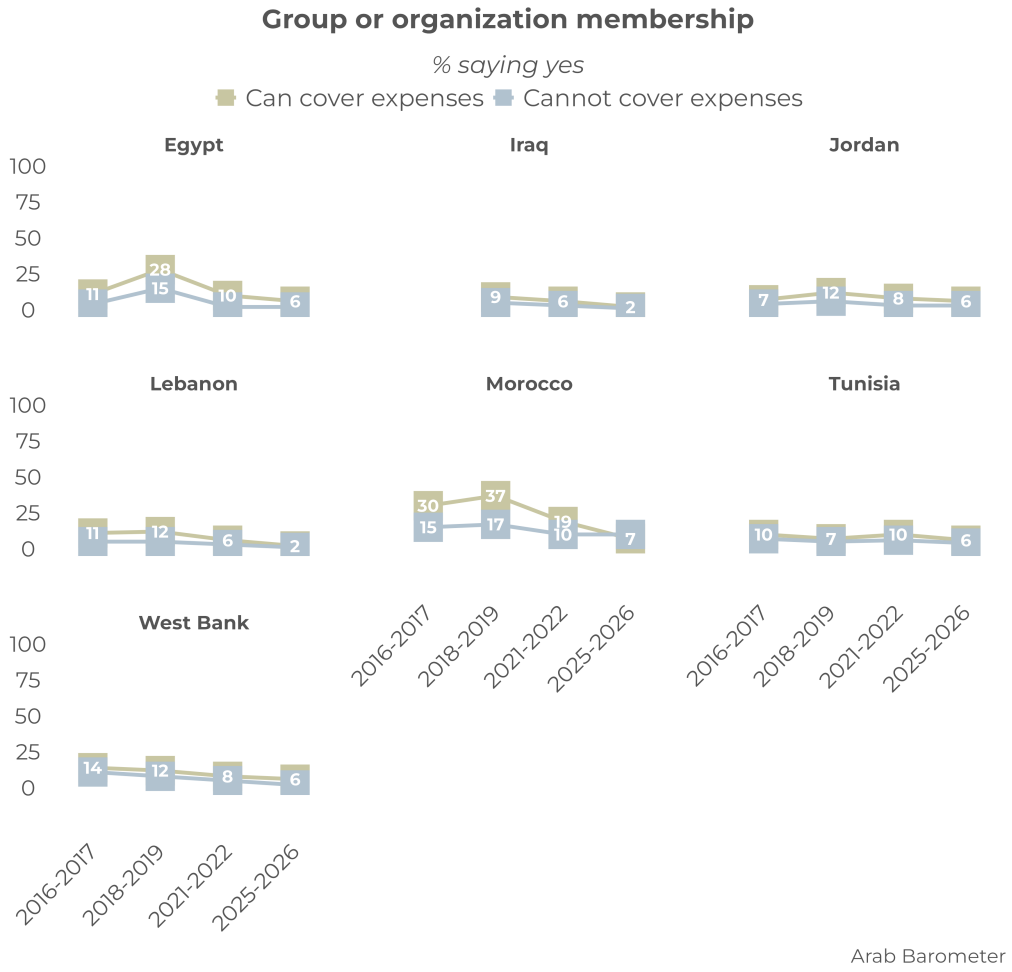
Public Engagement with Civil Society

Perhaps as a result of the perception that civil society is limited to service provision and humanitarian roles, formal membership has stagnated or declined over the last decade. By 2025-2026, fewer than 10 percent of citizens say they belong to an organization in every country surveyed except Mauritania. In all countries for which it is possible to compare trends over the last decade or so, the membership rate today is no higher than it was at the turn of the decade. Declines have been particularly notable in countries where membership was relatively higher several years ago, including Egypt, the West Bank, and Morocco.

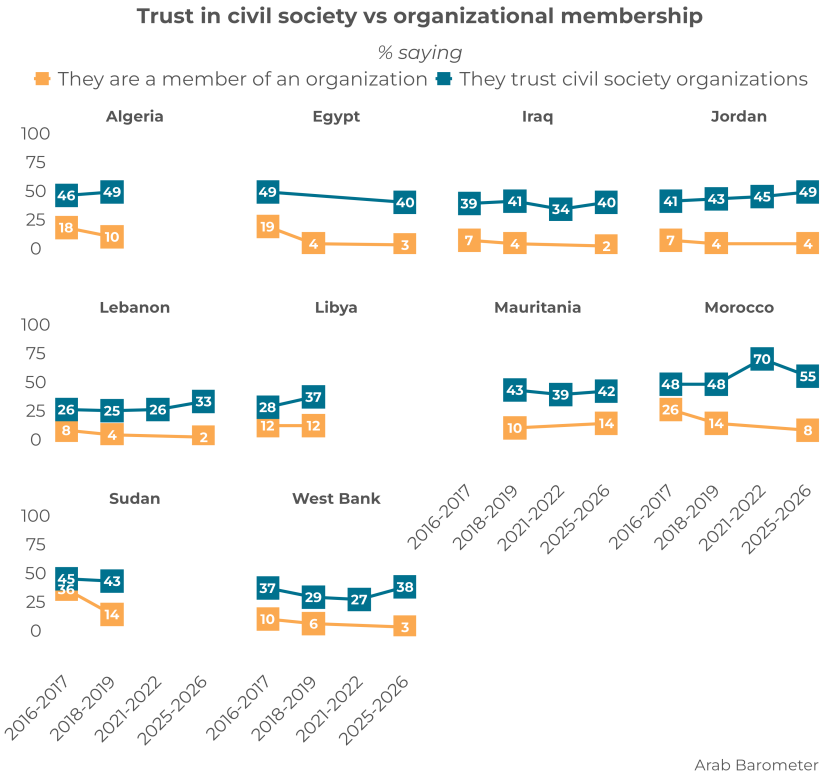


Demographic patterns suggest that shrinking membership is related to civil society's constrained role. In countries with the sharpest declines, citizens with higher socioeconomic status have accounted for much of the change. About a decade ago in Egypt and Morocco, the membership rate among more educated citizens was at least 20 percentage points higher. In the West Bank, Lebanon, and Tunisia, the gap was at least 10 points. By 2025, these differences had largely disappeared. A similar, though less pronounced, pattern by income appears in Egypt and Morocco. Citizens with a higher SES are often expected to lead political and social movements. Declining participation in formal organizations is consistent with a shift toward other forms of personal engagement in pursuit of these goals. Membership among lower-SES citizens has declined more gradually, perhaps because civil society's material services remain more salient in their daily lives.





Trend findings show that country-level organizational membership does not track closely with trust in civil society organizations. Rising trust in Jordan, recent increases in Lebanon and the West Bank, and the post-earthquake increase in Morocco all coincided with continued decline or stagnation in membership. Even when civil society organizations gain citizens' trust, they do not necessarily gain members. This reinforces the view of civil society as a supplement to state service provision in the minds of MENA publics. Better evaluations of electricity provision or trash collection would not necessarily lead citizens to participate directly in providing those services; similarly, higher trust in civil society organizations does not translate into formal membership. As a result, increasing membership in such organizations appears to be a meaningful challenge.



Morocco, where organizational membership has declined most sharply, illustrates how state policy and co-optation of civil society's political and social functions may contribute to citizens' reluctance to join organizations and their preference for addressing these issues outside of formal organizational membership.

One contextual factor that may help explain the Moroccan pattern is the government's response to the Arab uprisings. In response to these regional protests, Morocco undertook constitutional reforms that formalized the status of civil society organizations but also created mechanisms that could influence and control reform agendas and align those agendas with the state. By 2016, the limitations on civil society as a force for political and social change were evident during the Hirak al-Rif movement. Responding to the marginalization of the Rif region and its population, the movement operated largely outside formal organizations, with social media playing a central role. In the face of police crackdowns, it relied on frequent, decentralized, rapidly organized, and unexpected protests. In subsequent years, key leaders were arrested for their involvement, underscoring the risks of visible participation even in loosely organized movements.

Arab Barometer findings indicate that citizens across the region often view methods outside formal organizational membership as more effective for influencing political change. When asked in 2023-2024 which action would be most effective at influencing a national government decision, citizens in every country surveyed were more likely to choose participating in a protest over forming a group to address the issue. Forming a group is viewed as more effective in Morocco, the West Bank, and Mauritania than in other countries; these cases have, or recently had, higher organizational membership than much of the region. In most other countries, engaging in a virtual campaign is viewed as at least as effective as forming a group. In some countries, using personal connections (wasta) with government officials is viewed as more effective. In several cases, citizens are more likely to say that no option is effective to address the problem relative to forming a group. Nonetheless, the large majority in every country can identify an action they consider most effective. This finding suggests that citizens across MENA are not necessarily uninterested in political change, nor do they uniformly think that influencing policy is impossible. Rather, they may recognize the constraints under which they operate and view formal organizations as poorly suited to influencing political change in that context.

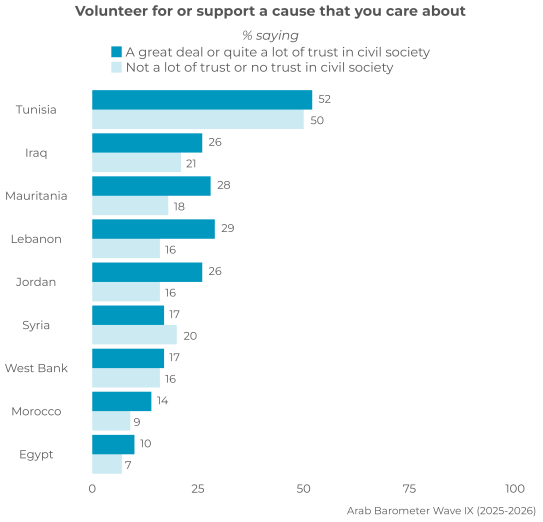
Most effective action to influence a national government decision

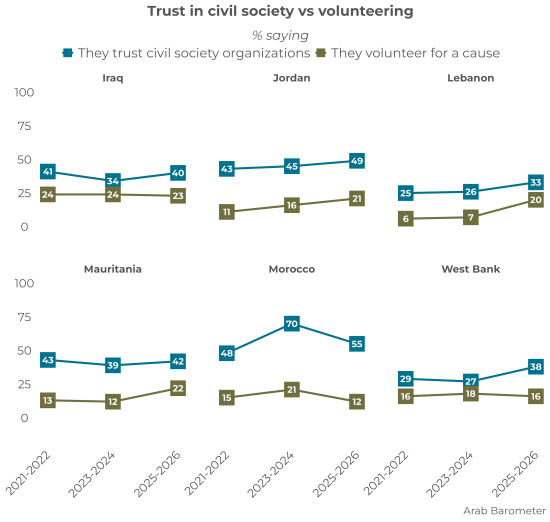
% saying



Arab Barometer, Wave VIII (2023-2024)

These findings also suggest that trust in civil society may be associated with informal civic engagement. In 2025-2026, citizens who trust civil society are more likely to say they volunteered their time for a cause in every country except for Syria and Tunisia, where the differences are within the margin of error. The gap is at least 10 points in Jordan, Lebanon, and Mauritania. Over time, volunteering sometimes tracks trust in civil society more closely than formal membership does. For example, recent increases in trust in civil society in Jordan and Lebanon were accompanied by higher volunteering rates while membership declined or stagnated. Greater trust in civil society is therefore associated with informal volunteering even where it does not translate into formal membership. Whether trust encourages participation or participation builds trust is an open question.





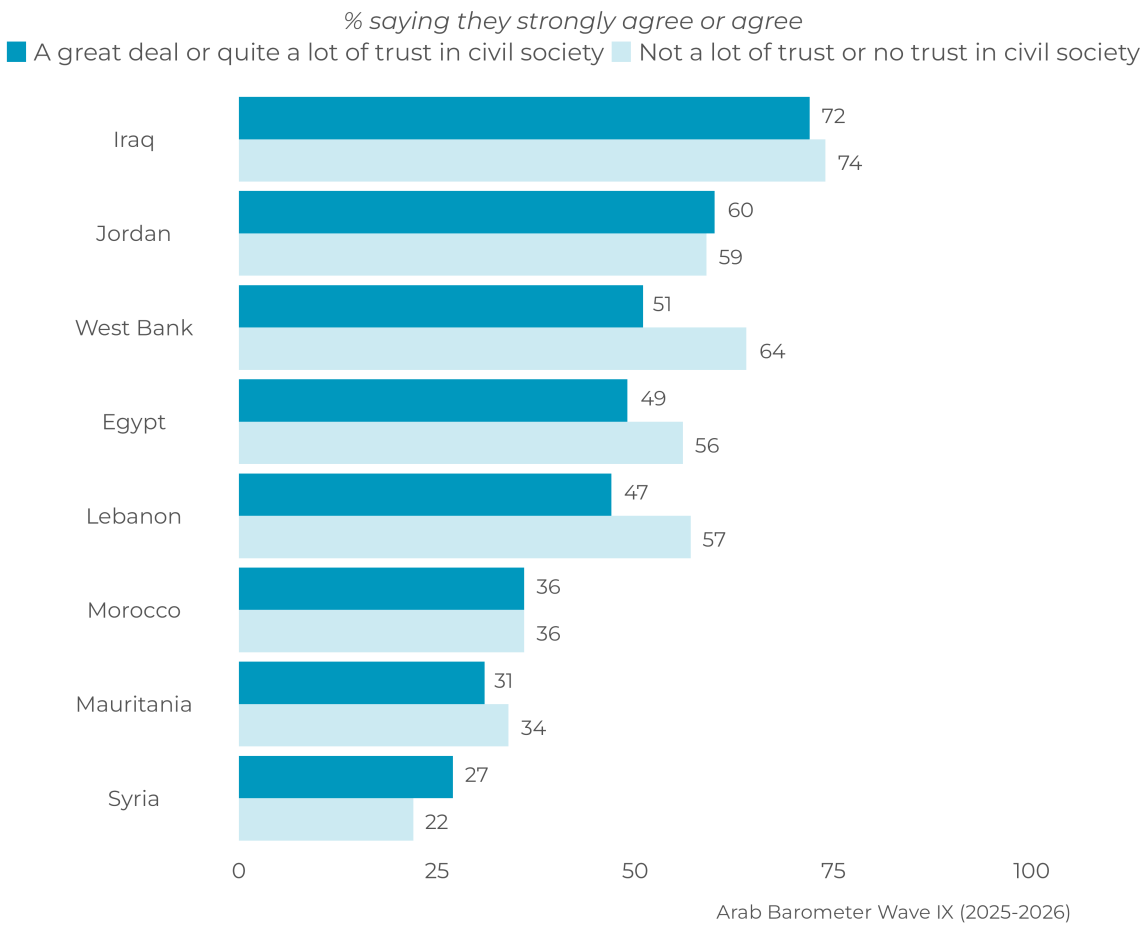
Civil Society and Attitudes Towards Democracy

Research on civil society is often linked with the idea that it can support and promote democratic development. This theory and challenges to it are well beyond the scope of this report. However, the constrained roles and resulting low levels of membership and engagement documented across MENA have clear implications for the mechanisms through which civil society is typically expected to support democratization. The findings also point to ways trust in civil society may be associated with views of democracy and may indirectly shape how citizens in the region define it.

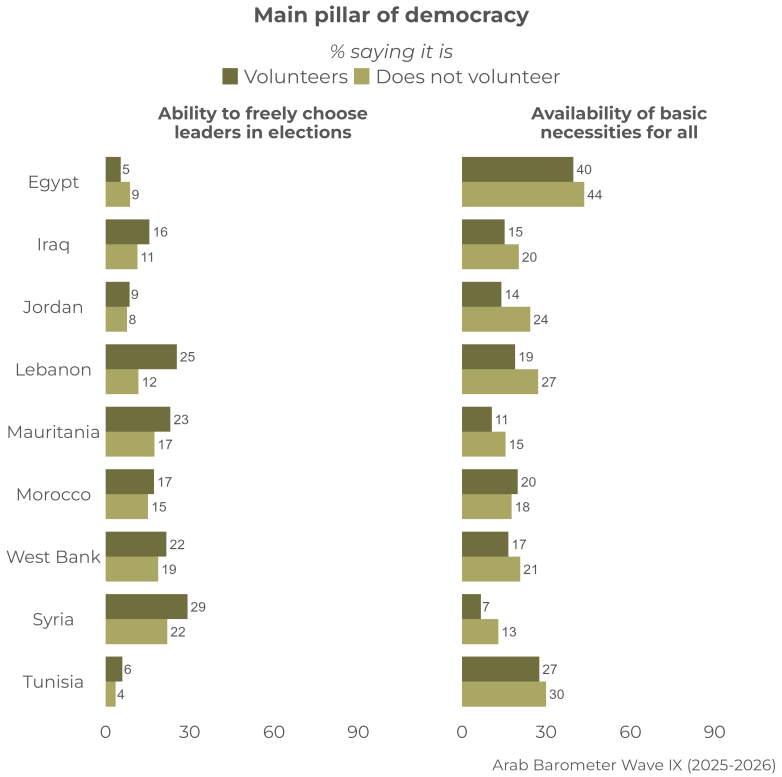
Trust in civil society is associated with more positive evaluations of democratic effectiveness in some countries. In the West Bank, Egypt, Lebanon, and Mauritania, citizens who trust civil society are less likely to agree that democratic regimes are indecisive and full of problems. In Iraq, Jordan, and Morocco, the differences are within the margin of error. In Syria, citizens who trust civil society are more likely to agree with the statement. One possible explanation is that these citizens link civil society with democratic governance, making trusted civil society an example of effective democratic practice. Another is that some citizens across MENA rate their own countries as democratic. To the extent that successful civil society supports the state's ability to provide key services, it may also improve perceptions that democratic systems are effective.

Democratic regimes are indecisive and full of problems

% saying they strongly agree or agree



The association between volunteering and citizens' definitions of democracy raises another possibility: informal civic engagement may be linked to more procedural conceptions of democracy. Under the right conditions, volunteering alongside other citizens in support of a cause may provide some of the same experiences as formal organizational membership. Across most of the region, citizens who volunteer are more likely to identify the ability to freely select leaders in elections as the main pillar of democracy than those who do not volunteer. In Morocco, Jordan, and Tunisia, the differences between these groups are within the margin of error, although they follow the same general pattern. The exception to this pattern is Egypt, where citizens who do not volunteer are more likely to identify elections as the main pillar. Similarly, citizens who volunteer are less likely than their peers to select basic necessity provision as the key pillar in every country except Morocco, where the difference is again within the margin of error. The direction of the relationship cannot be determined from these data as civic engagement may shape democratic conceptions or citizens with more procedural conceptions may be more likely to volunteer, but there does appear to be a clear link between the two.



Conclusion

Civil society in the Middle East and North Africa faces both constraints and opportunities. Its vision as an engine of political and social progress has faded across much of the region. Many citizens cannot identify a specific role played by civil society organizations, and few say they belong to any organization. At the same time, Arab publics are clearer about what they want civil society to do and reward effective performance with greater trust. This creates an opening for organizations to improve citizens' material well-being and respond to regional crises. For those who view civil society as a force for democratization, the findings show trust is associated with more positive assessments of democratic performance and some forms of informal civic engagement. Most citizens across MENA can also identify actions they consider effective for achieving political change despite the constraints they face. Those seeking to facilitate political participation through civil society could adapt their models to the methods citizens view as effective and available in their countries.

ABOUT ARAB BAROMETER

Arab Barometer is a nonpartisan research network that provides insight into the social, political, and economic attitudes and values of ordinary citizens across the Arab world.

Since 2006, we have been conducting rigorous, nationally representative public opinion surveys using probability samples of adult populations across 15 countries in the Arab world.

We are the longest-standing and the largest repository of publicly available data on the views of men and women in the MENA region. Our findings give a voice to the needs and concerns of Arab publics.

