

# Arab Barometer VI

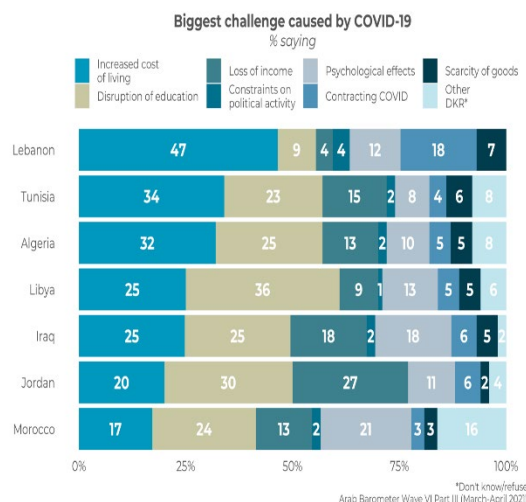
## Iraq Country Report

2021

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Beginning in October 2019, just four months before the first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in Iraq, the largest anti-government mass protests since 2003 swept across the country as Iraqis decried corruption, unemployment, and lack of public services, among other grievances. While the mass protests might have subsided because of use of government force or pandemic-induced lockdowns, the problems Iraqis faced before the outbreak of COVID-19 have only compounded during it.

These multiple grievances that predate the pandemic permeate Iraqi public opinion, if not in fact fueling the significant variation within it. While public opinion in other countries surveyed in Arab Barometer’s Wave VI coalesces on one or at most two challenges, Iraqis are nearly evenly split between concern over COVID-19 (27 percent), the economy (26 percent), and corruption (23 percent) as the most important challenge facing their country. There is equal variation in what Iraqis suggest is the biggest problem caused by COVID-19 in their country: equal shares (24 percent) each say it is the increased cost of living and disruption to their children’s education, and equal shares (18 percent) each say it’s the effect on their psychological state and the loss of household income.



The COVID-19 crisis and ensuing fiscal downturn related to oil, which previously accounted for 90 percent of GDP<sup>1</sup>, all but left the Iraqi government bankrupt such that pandemic concerns appear to be more related to economic fallouts

<sup>1</sup> World Bank. 2020. “Breaking Out of Fragility: A Country Economic Memorandum for Diversification and Growth in Iraq.” International Development in Focus. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-1637-6. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO.

rather than health-related ones. Though there is significant regional variation in degree and reason for concern over COVID-19, vaccine hesitancy is high throughout the country.

With the World Bank estimating that up to 2 million Iraqis would be plunged into poverty in 2020<sup>2</sup>, citizens' views of their country's economic outlook and the evaluations of governmental response to it is resoundingly clear in public opinion. The degree of trust in government and public institutions is among the lowest—if not the lowest—among surveyed countries while beliefs about the degree of corruption are among the highest. And while such grievances abound, the ability to express them is curtailed as Iraqis signal the retrenchment of civil liberties.

As Iraqis look to move abroad or look abroad for help, many are looking to China, whose favorability among Iraqis has been helped no doubt by infrastructure and oil contracts it signed with the Iraqi government in the past year. In contrast, the U.S.'s image remained tarnished, if not by past interventions but potentially by its proximity to the normalization agreements between Israel and various countries in MENA. The overall figure, however, obscures important regional variation, as U.S. image remains favorable in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

These are among the main findings of a nationally representative telephone survey conducted in Iraq during 2021. The sample was drawn through random digit dialing (RDD). In March 2021, we interviewed 1,016 Iraqi citizens to track changes in their evaluations of their conditions over time during the pandemic. The margin of error of these reported results is  $\pm 3$  percentage points. The surveys are part of Arab Barometer's sixth wave which was carried out in seven MENA countries. Arab Barometer's sixth wave is the only publicly available survey that captures the changing sentiments of citizens across MENA during the unprecedented times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional information about the surveys can be found in the links below.

**About AB6**

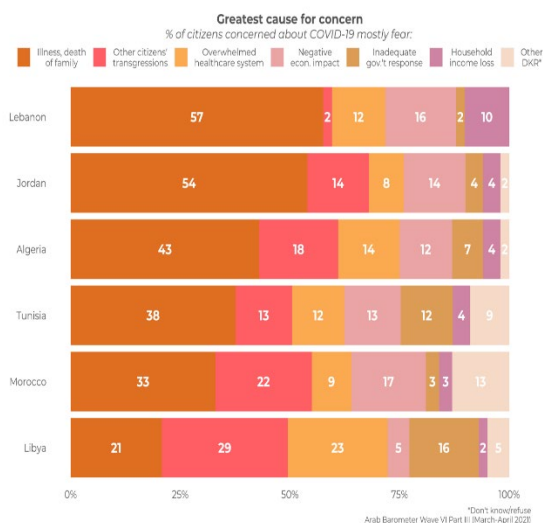
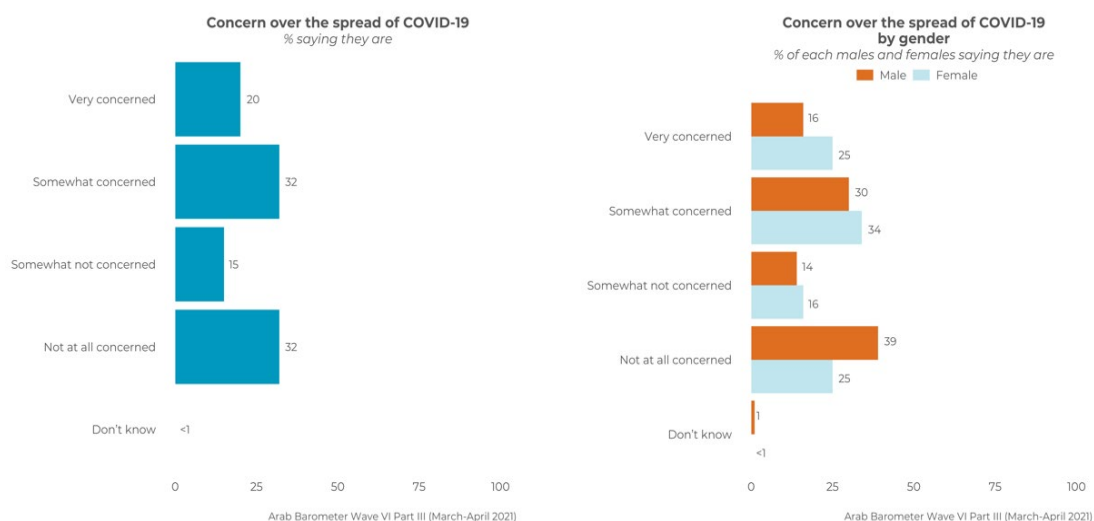
**How we did this.**

---

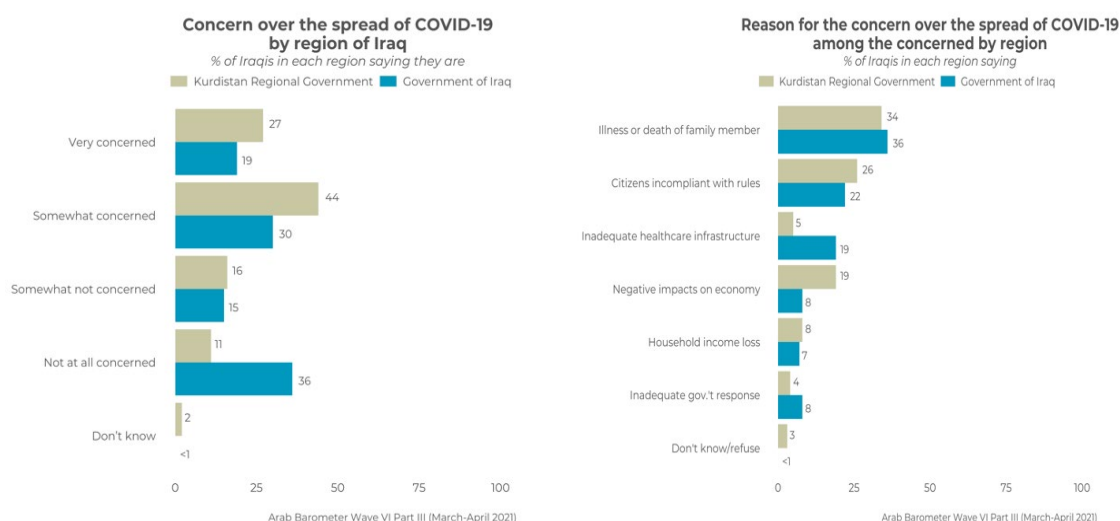
<sup>2</sup> World Bank. Fall 2020. "Protecting Vulnerable Iraqis in the Time of a Pandemic, the Case for Urgent Stimulus and Economic Reforms." Iraq Economic Monitor  
<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/34749/154260.pdf>

## COVID-19

Coronavirus cases had not yet peaked in Iraq in March 2021 when Arab Barometer Wave VI was being fielded, which potentially explains why it is just over half of all Iraqis (52 percent) who report they were very or somewhat concerned about the spread of the virus. Women (59 percent, very or somewhat concerned) are much more concerned than men (47 percent) about the spread, a pattern observed across countries surveyed in Wave VI. While the death or illness of a family member is what primarily fuels the worries of those who are concerned (35 percent), the plurality (43 percent) of unconcerned citizens suggests that the threat of the virus is exaggerated.

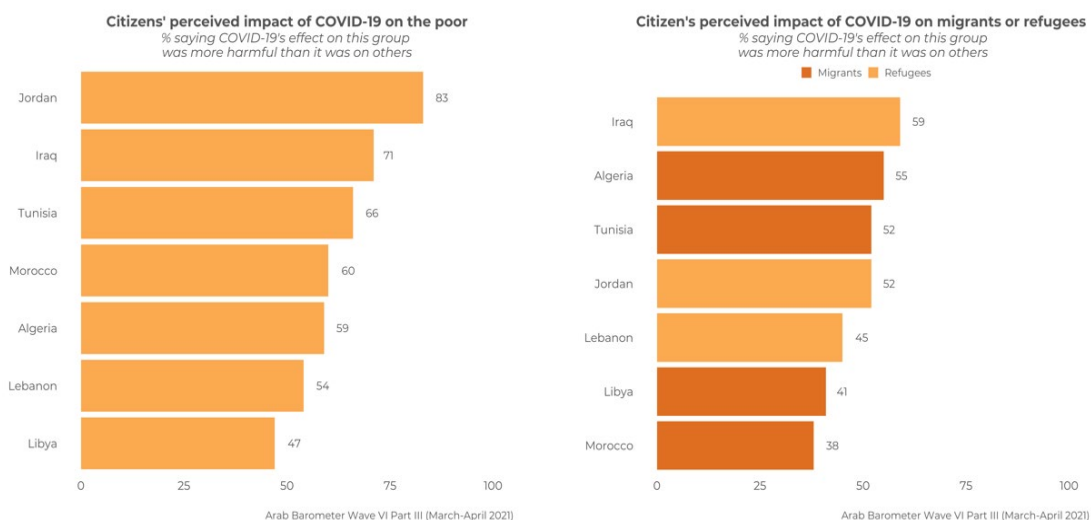


Significant differences in degree of and reason for concern emerge, however, across different regions of the country. In the three governorates that formally constitute the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRG)—Erbil, Dohuk, and Sulaymaniyah—71 percent of Iraqis say they are concerned, compared with just 50 percent of those living in the remaining 15 governorates under the Government of Iraq (GOI). Commensurately, the reasons for concern or lack of concern are equally varied. While Iraqis who live in the KRI are more concerned with negative impacts on the economy (19 percent, compared to just 4 percent of those living under the GOI), Iraqis under the GOI are much more concerned with the inability of their healthcare systems to handle COVID cases (19 percent, versus only 5 percent of those living in the KRI). The plurality of those concerned about COVID in both areas, however, report it is because they fear death or illness of a family member (36 percent GOI, 34 percent KRI) and the plurality of those unconcerned still report it is because the threat posed by COVID is exaggerated (43 percent GOI, 37 percent KRI).

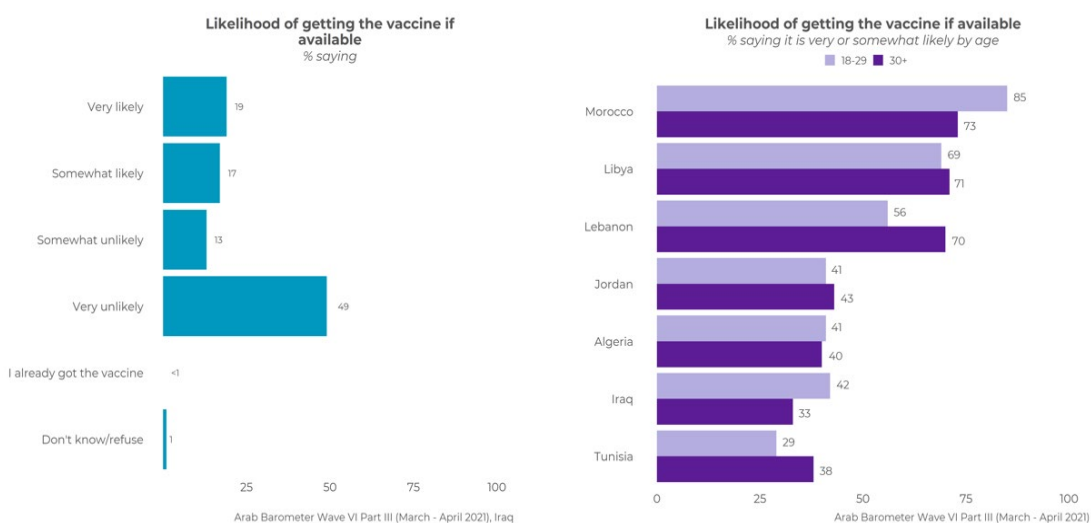


Despite being divided on the threat posed by COVID, Iraqis are more unified in their beliefs that the pandemic has more negatively affected vulnerable populations: 71 percent of all Iraqis say the pandemic has had a more harmful effect on the poor, and 59 percent say it has had a more harmful effect on refugees, including more than 250,000 Syrian refugees in the country.<sup>3</sup>

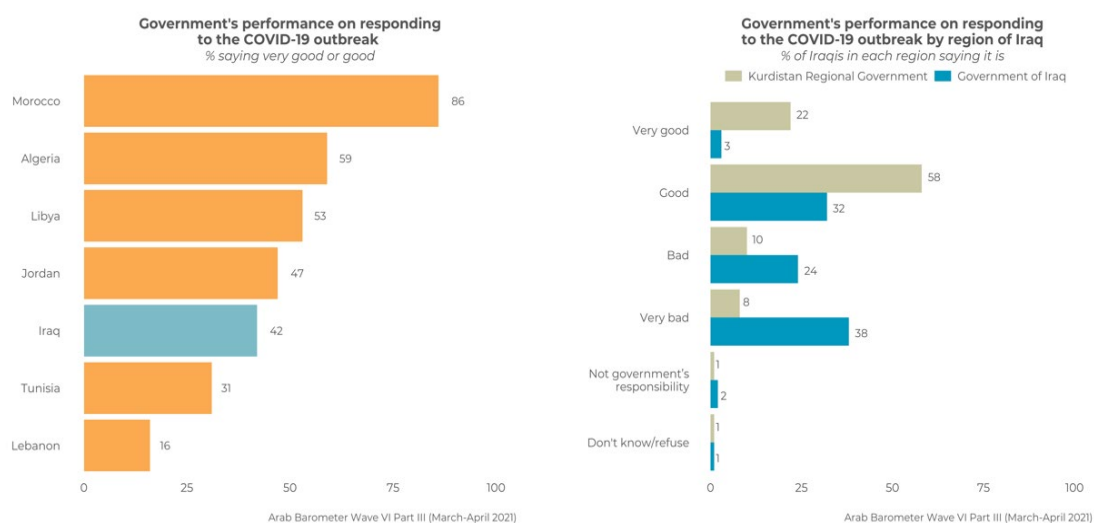
<sup>3</sup> International Rescue Committee. "Iraq Country Facts." <https://www.rescue.org/country/iraq>



Iraqis are also unified in their reluctance to get vaccinated against the virus. While degree of concern varies dramatically between the KRI and GOI region, vaccine hesitance does not. Overall, only 36 percent of all Iraqis indicate that they are very or somewhat likely to get the vaccine should it become available to them: among those in the KRI, this rises only slightly to 41 percent in comparison to 35 percent of those living in the GOI region. Among those who want the vaccine, there is no clear preference for which vaccine they want: 23 percent want one manufactured in the U.S.; 21 percent from Russia, 20 percent from China, and 14 percent from the U.K. But Iraqis stand out from most other countries (save Morocco) surveyed in Wave 6: those 18-29 years old are significantly more likely to want to get the vaccine (42 percent) in comparison to the older cohort (33 percent of Iraqis aged 30+).



Though concern over the pandemic is at best mixed and resistance to getting the vaccine high, Iraqis mostly disapprove of their government's response to the COVID-19 outbreak: 42 percent report that the government's response has been very good or good. Yet again, regional differences emerge. Only a minority (36 percent) of those living in the GOI region compared to an overwhelming majority (80 percent) of those in the KRI are satisfied with their respective governments' performance on responding to COVID-19. While this dissatisfaction finds parity in the health- and education-related fallout of the pandemic, much appears to be linked to its economic ramifications.

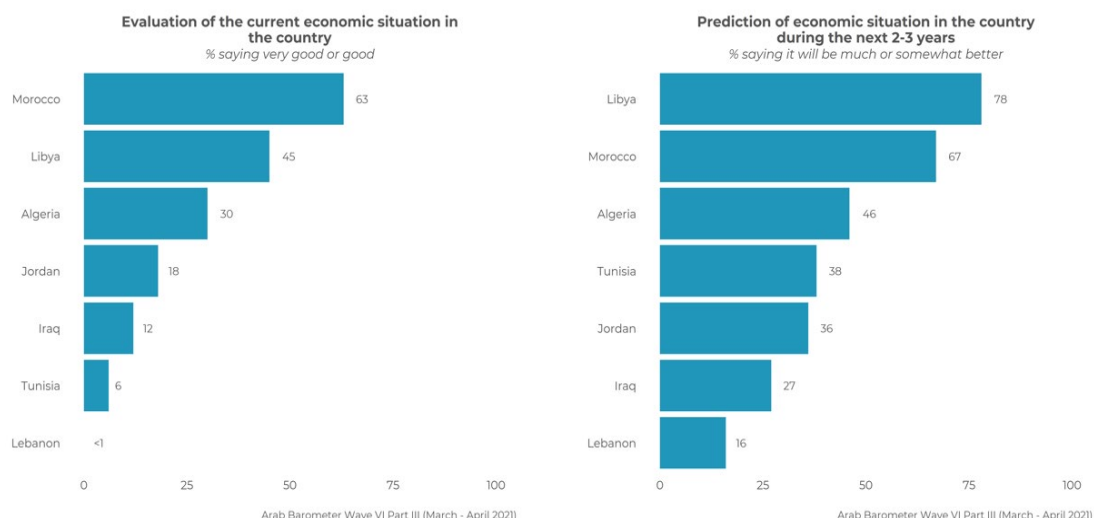


## ECONOMIC CONDITIONS

Iraq's economy was one of the hardest hit by the pandemic. According to the World Bank's Spring 2021 Economic Monitor, the country's GDP shrank by more than 10 percent in 2020, signifying the largest contraction in the country's history since 2003. The plummeting demand for oil and commensurate decrease in oil GDP caused the GOI to dramatically cut discretionary spending; fall into arrears on wage payments to public sector workers; and devalue the Iraqi dinar by 18.5 percent against the US dollar.<sup>4</sup>

Iraqis' opinions on economic conditions in their country reflect these developments. Just 12 percent of Iraqis evaluate the current economic state in their country as very good or good, the third-lowest overall evaluation among countries surveyed in Arab Barometer Wave VI in spring 2021. Furthermore, few have optimistic views about the future, as just 27 percent believe the economic conditions will improve in the next two to three years.

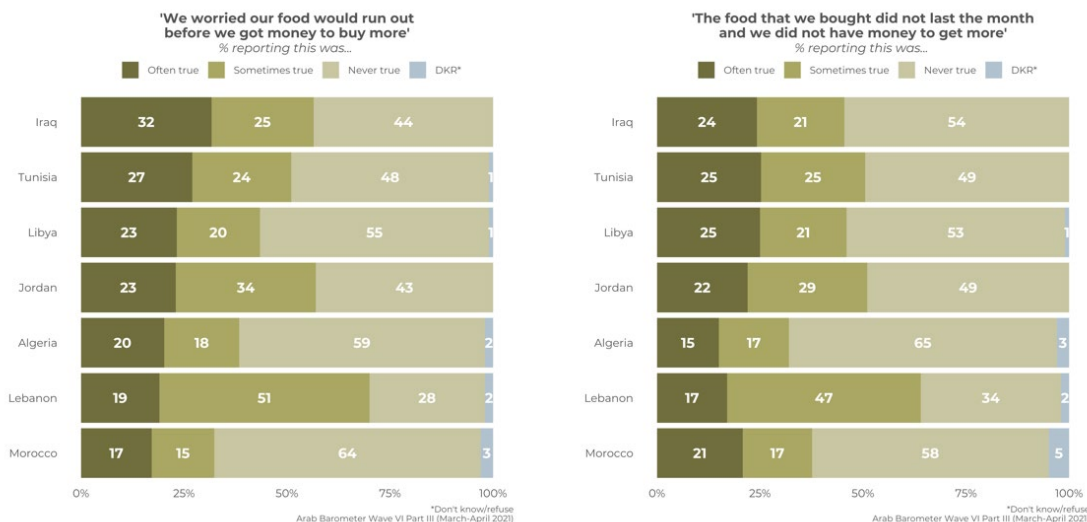
<sup>4</sup> World Bank Iraq Economic Monitor. Spring 2021. "Seizing the Opportunity for Reforms and Managing Volatility." <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/552761621369308685/pdf/Iraq-Economic-Monitor-Seizing-the-Opportunity-for-Reforms-and-Managing-Volatility.pdf>



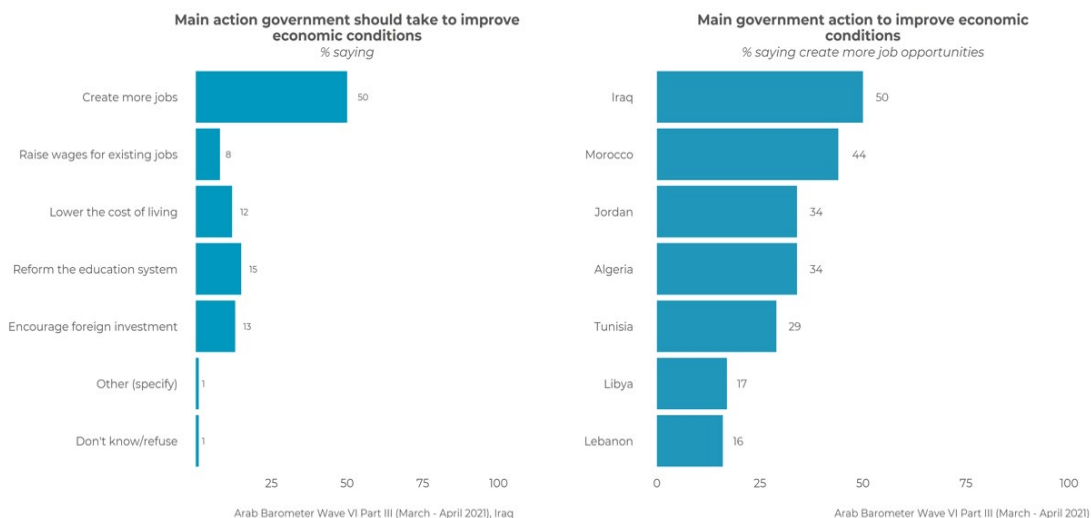
One of the most acute ways in which Iraqis have felt these economic hardships is with respect to their livelihoods. While a small minority (5 percent) says the pandemic caused a permanent job loss, a larger share (45 percent) says the pandemic caused temporary job interruptions. Again, rather than any age, gender, education level, or income-related differences, it is regional differences that reveal variation: 64 percent of those in KRI compared to 41 percent in GOI report a temporary interruption to their jobs.

Coupled with the rising cost of living, such job interruptions, however temporary, have affected Iraqis' standard of living: 45 percent of Iraqis said that food often or sometimes ran out before they had money to buy more. Additionally, nearly one third (32 percent) of all Iraqis—the highest share of any country surveyed—suggest that they often worried that food would run out before they had money to buy more, followed by 25 percent who said they sometimes worried. At the same time, only five percent of Iraqis report receiving any aid from the government to alleviate financial strain.



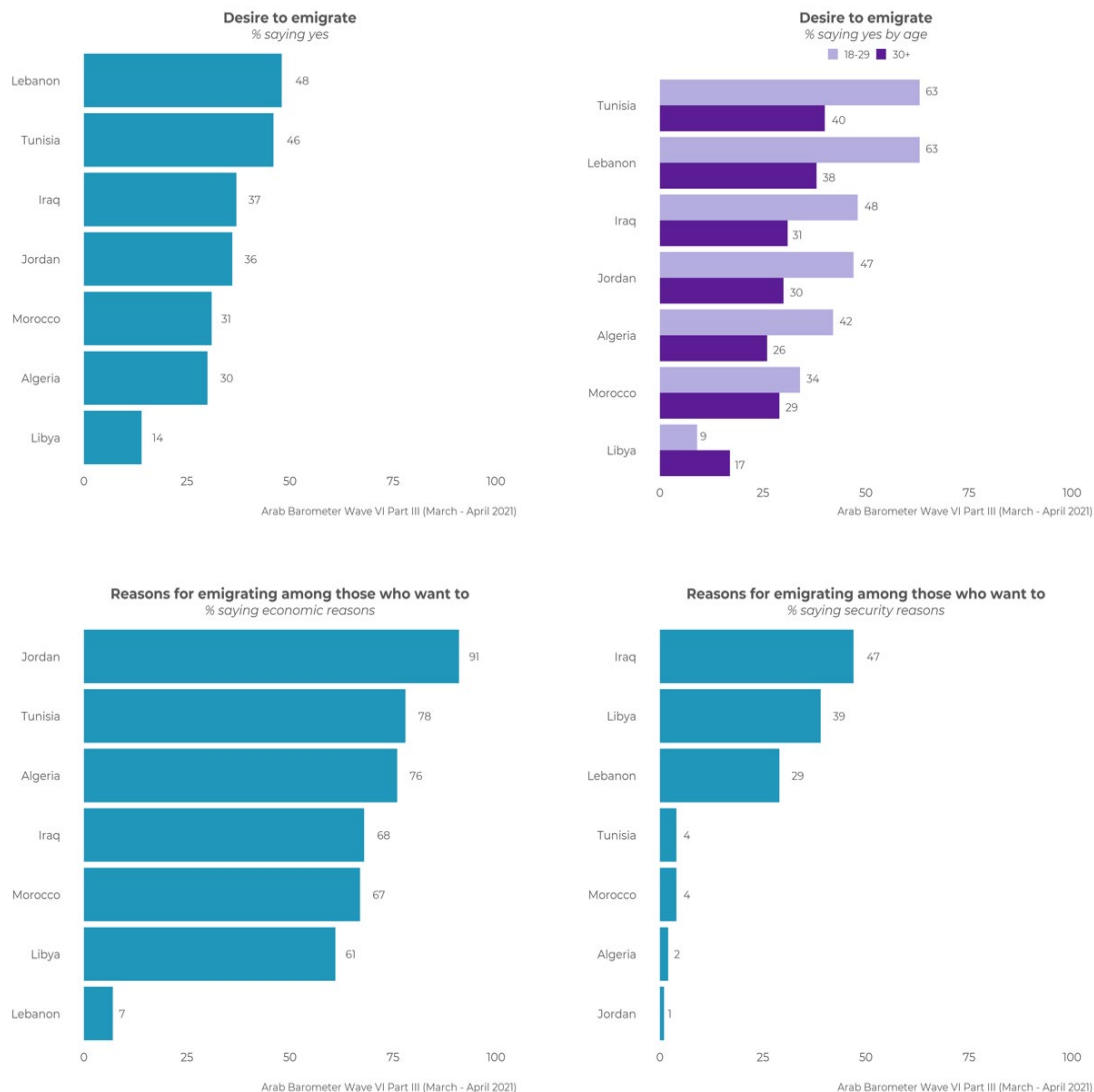


As needed as this aid might, citizens in Iraq want long-term economic rehabilitation to be achieved in a different way. Half of all citizens believe that their government should be focusing on creating more jobs to improve economic conditions in the country, making Iraqis—regardless of the region in which they live—more unified in this belief than citizens of any other surveyed MENA country.



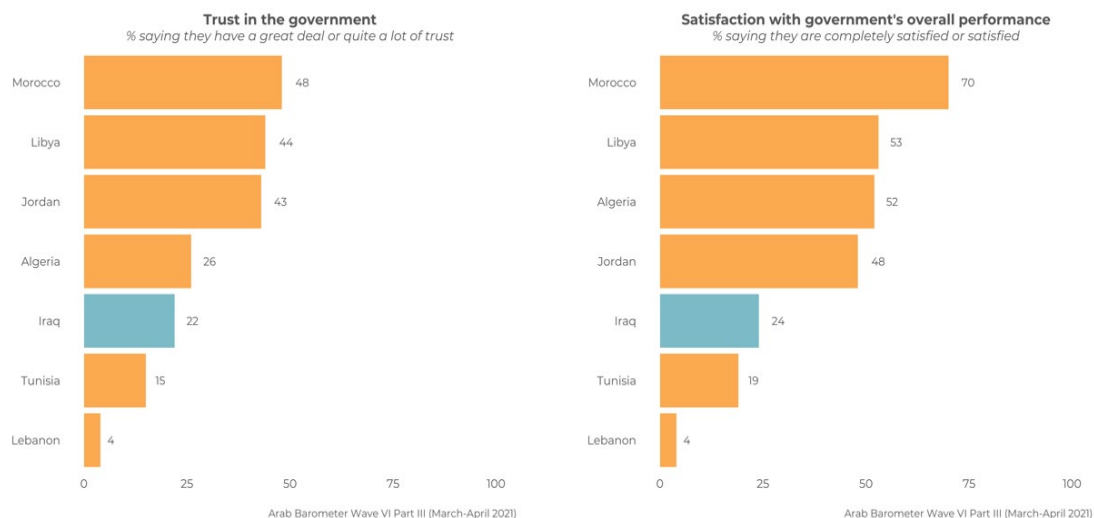
As the country's economy stagnates and citizens are mostly pessimistic at the future outlook, a significant minority of Iraqis (37 percent) indicate that they have thought of emigrating elsewhere. Notably, youth (18-29 years old) are considerably more likely to entertain the possibility (48 percent) than their older compatriots (31 percent). Of those who want to emigrate, 68 percent want to do so for economic reasons, and 47 percent—the highest share of any

country surveyed—also say it is for security reasons, which accords with Iraqis’ evaluations of overall political conditions in their country.

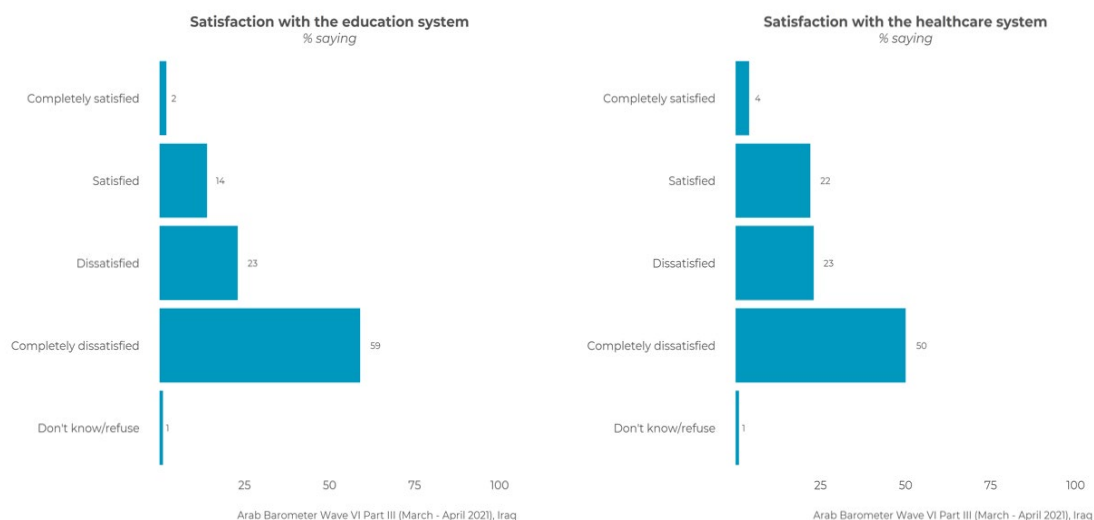


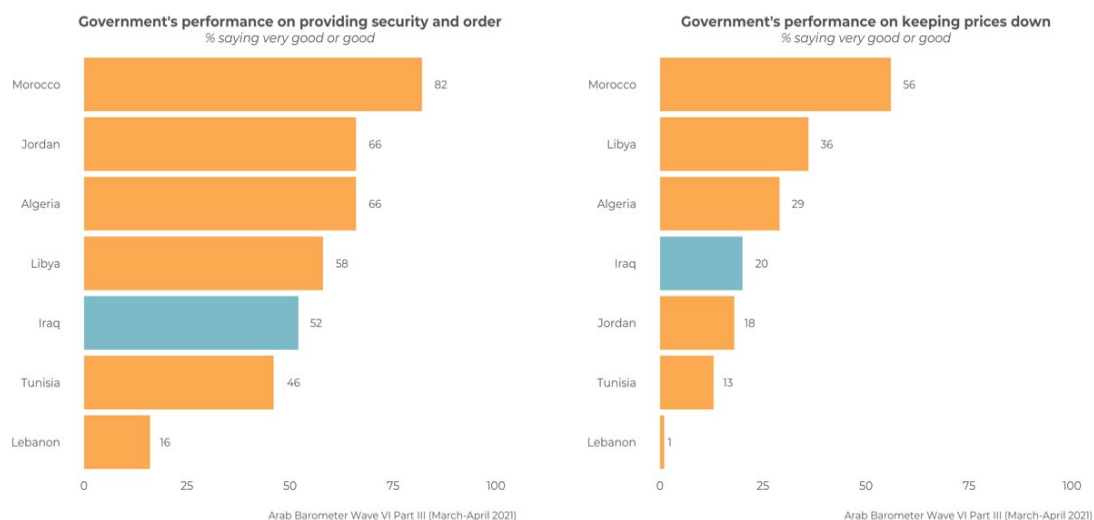
## GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE AND CORRUPTION

The confluence of COVID and worsening economic conditions caused by or preceding it are mirrored in Iraqis’ evaluations of their government. Just 22 percent have a great deal or quite a lot of trust in the government, and just 24 percent are completely satisfied or satisfied with the government’s overall performance, making Iraqis among the most dissatisfied in surveyed MENA countries.

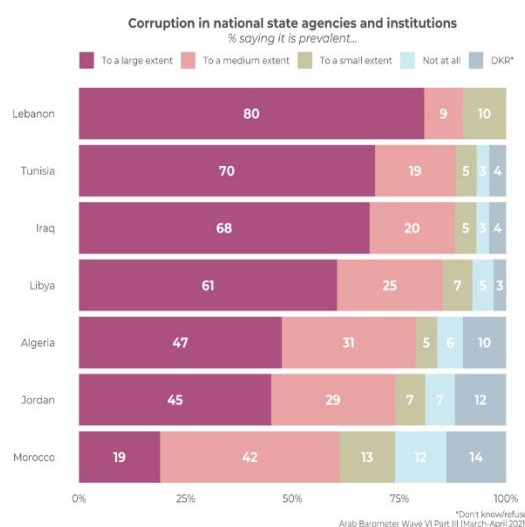


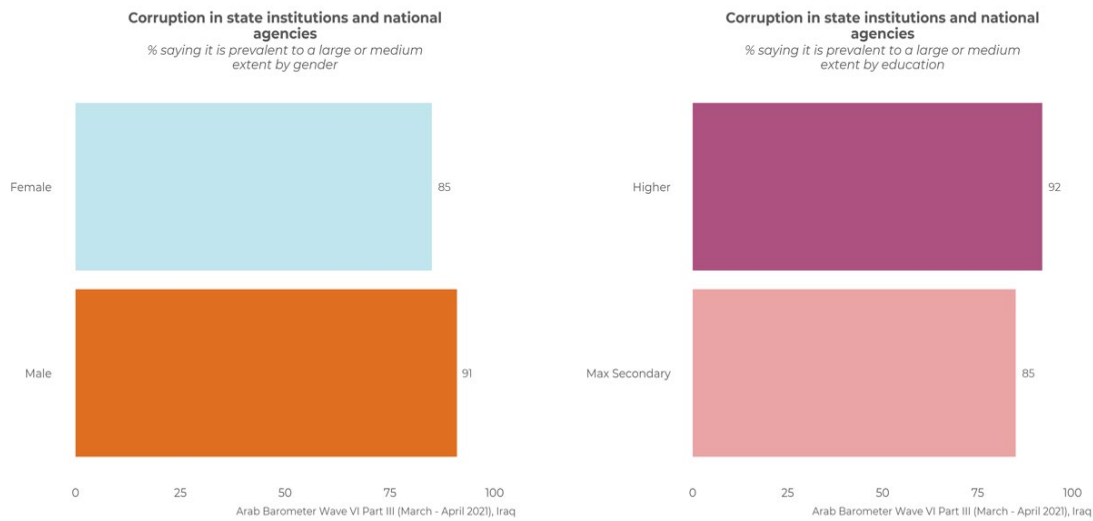
These low overall appraisals reflect pervasive dissatisfaction with various institutions and with the government's performance in specific issue areas. Minority shares of Iraqis are completely satisfied or satisfied with their educational institutions (17 percent) and healthcare institutions (26 percent). Just 52 percent of Iraqis suggest their government has done a very good or good job at maintaining security and order, and an even lower share (20 percent) have said the same about the government's ability to control inflation, making Iraq second only to Lebanon in this regard.



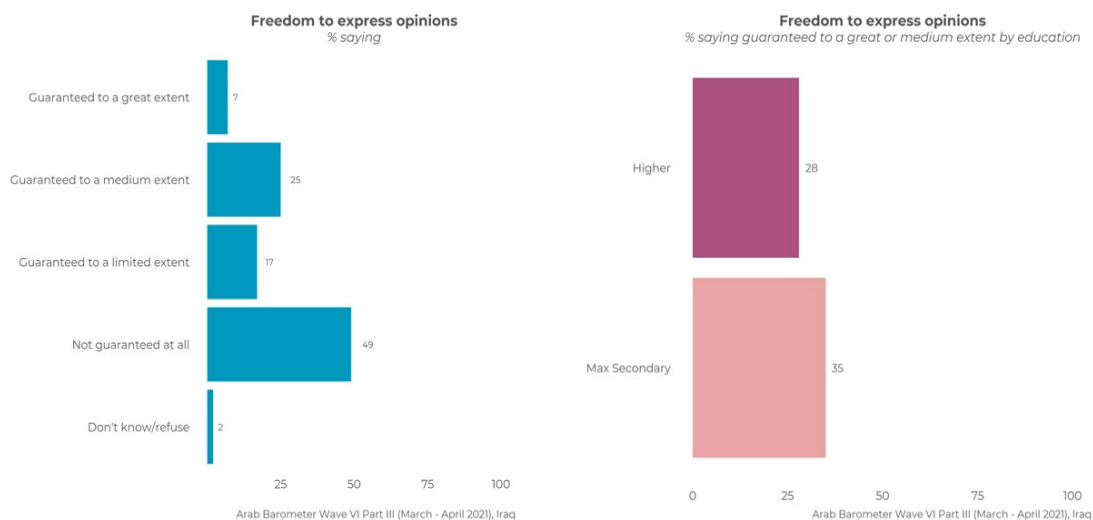


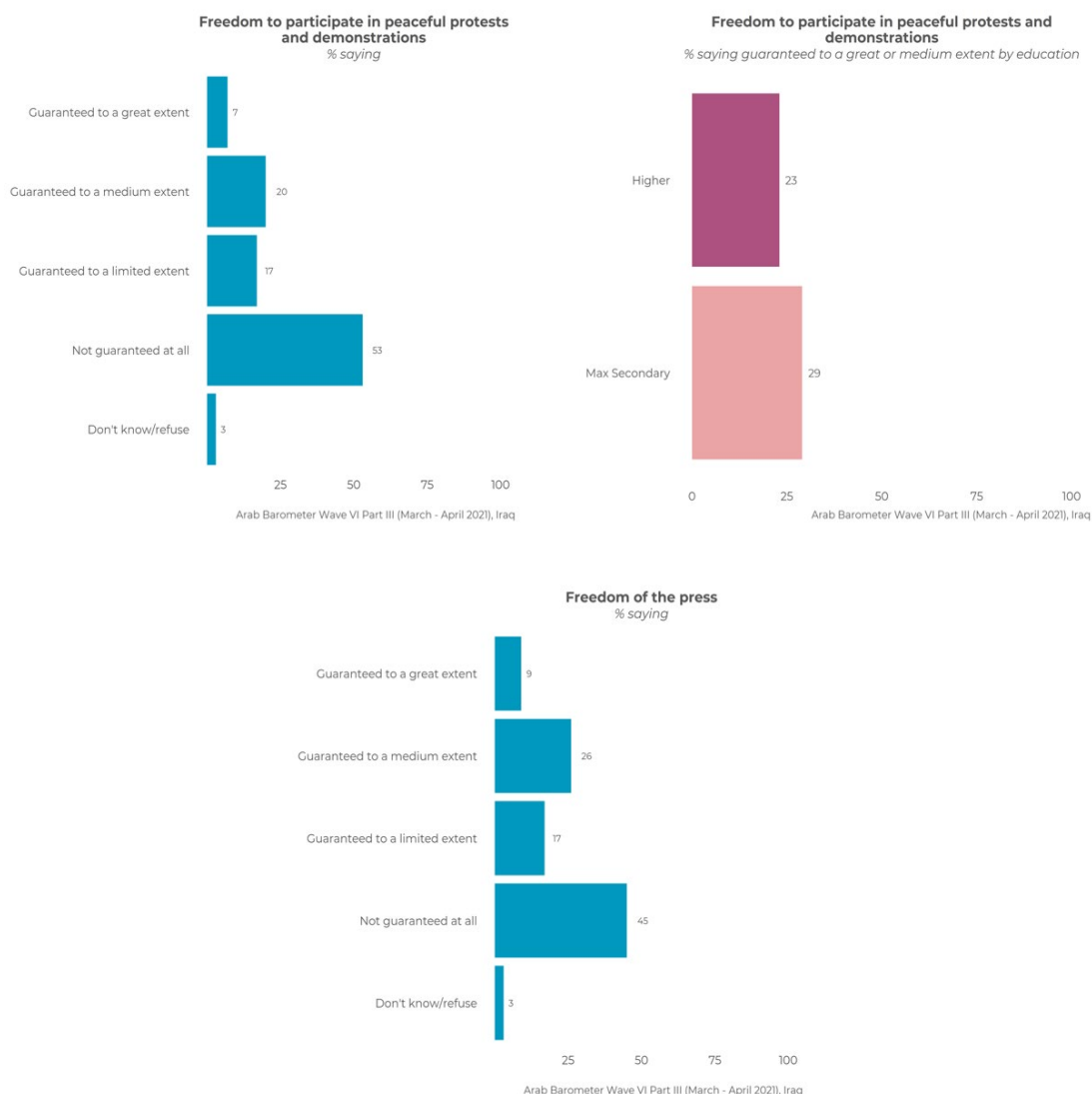
Dissatisfaction with government performance is as low as the perception of rampant corruption is high. Majorities of citizens across surveyed MENA countries in Wave VI say that corruption is a problem in their countries, and Iraqis are among the most adamant about its prevalence. Just over two-thirds of citizens in Iraq (68 percent) say that corruption pervades national and state agencies *to a large extent*, a share that rises to 88 percent when combined with those who say to a medium extent. Men (91 percent, vs. 85 percent women) and those with higher education (92 percent, vs. 85 percent with a secondary education or less) are more likely to say corruption is prevalent. Just 27 percent believe that the national government is working to crack down on corruption.





At the same time, Iraqis report that their ability to express these and other grievances is curtailed. Fewer Iraqis than citizens of any other MENA country surveyed in Wave VI report their civil liberties are protected. Just 32 percent think their freedom of speech is guaranteed to a great or medium extent; 27 believe the same for their right to protest; and only 35 percent say the media is guaranteed the ability to criticize the government. Again, those with higher levels of education (four-year university degree and above) are less likely than those who are less educated to say the first two rights are guaranteed.

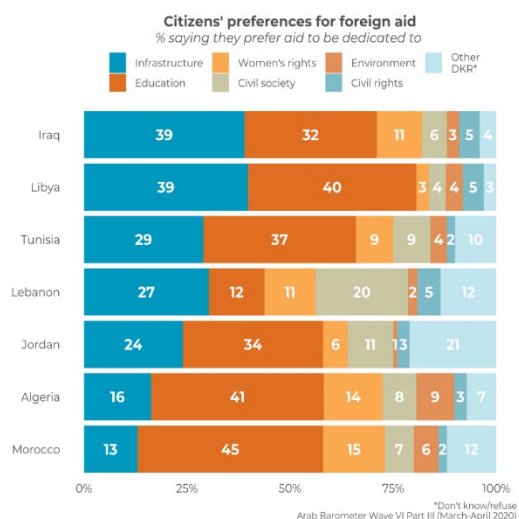




## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

With the perceived shortcomings of their own government in domestic affairs, the plurality of Iraqis (39 percent) wants foreign aid directed toward building infrastructure in the country, followed by a sizeable share who wants it dedicated to improving education (32 percent). Both sectors were in dire straights even prior to the pandemic. The 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and onslaught of the Islamic State (*Daesh*) and ensuing liberation campaigns bookended nearly 20 years of debilitating, armed conflict that left both infrastructure and educational institutions decimated. Just in the seven governorates that were seized by and later liberated from *Daesh*, the World

Bank estimated in 2018 that the education and health sectors suffered US\$2.4 billion and US\$2.3 billion in damage, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

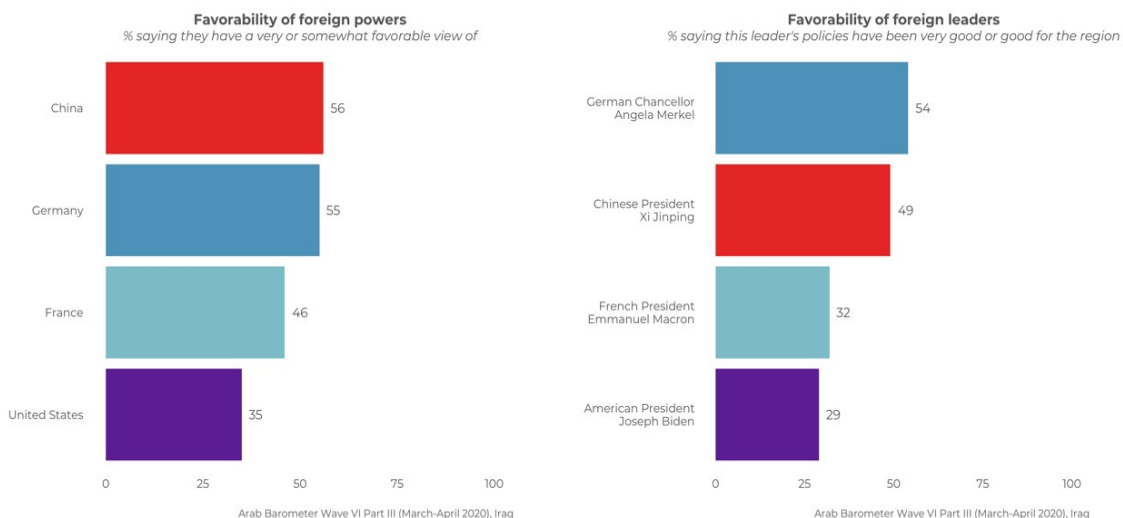


This desire for aid to be dedicated to infrastructure provides context for Iraqis' views of foreign powers. While just 35 percent have a very or somewhat favorable view of the United States, a majority (56 percent) hold the same view of China, whose Belt and Road Initiative Iraq joined in 2019.<sup>6</sup> In early 2021, amidst plummeting demand for oil in the previous year, Iraq awarded China a five-year, multibillion dollar oil contract—effectually termed a bailout for the cash-poor Iraqi government—estimated at US\$2 billion per year, with the first year paid out in advance.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps as a result, China's favorability among Iraqis trumps not only that of the U.S., but also Germany's (55 percent of Iraqis with a favorable view) and France's (46 percent).

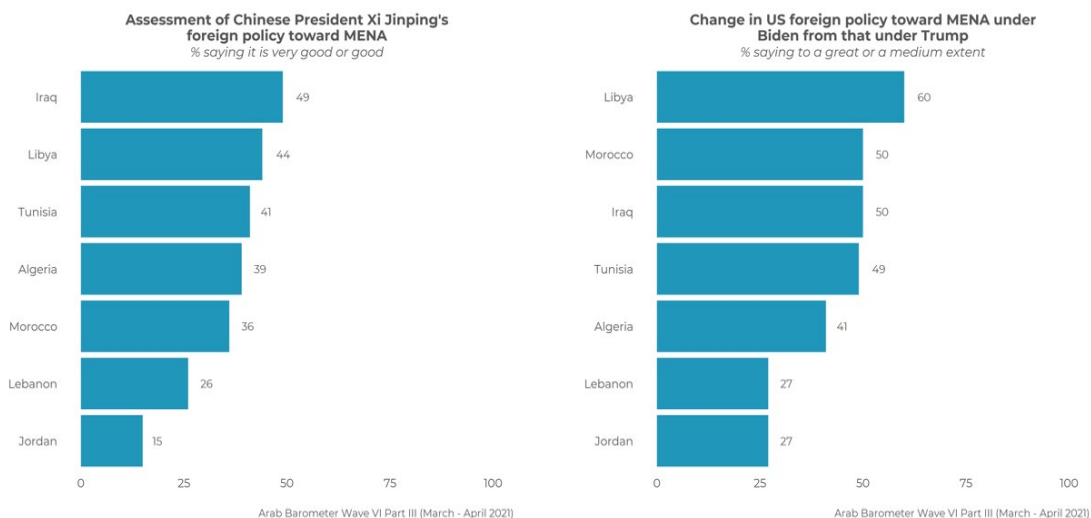
<sup>5</sup> World Bank Group. January 2018. "Iraq Reconstruction and Investment: Damage and Needs Assessment of Affected Governorates."  
<http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/600181520000498420/pdf/123631-REVISED-Iraq-Reconstruction-and-Investment-Part-2-Damage-and-Needs-Assessment-of-Affected-Governorates.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> *The Economic Times*. September 23, 2019. "Iraq to join China's Belt and Road project."  
<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/iraq-to-join-chinas-belt-and-road-project/articleshow/71262739.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>7</sup> Salma El Wardany. January 3, 2021. "Iraq Picks Chinese Firm for \$2 Billion Oil Prepayment Deal."  
*Bloomberg*. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-03/iraq-says-chinese-company-wins-2-billion-oil-prepayment-deal>



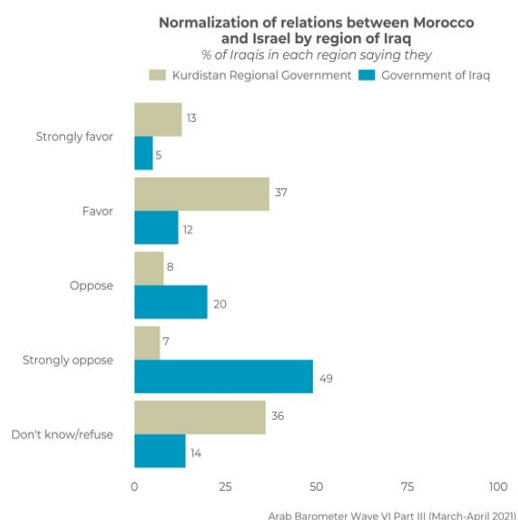
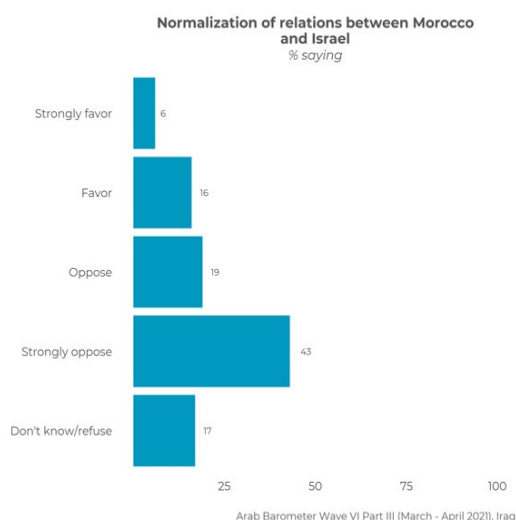
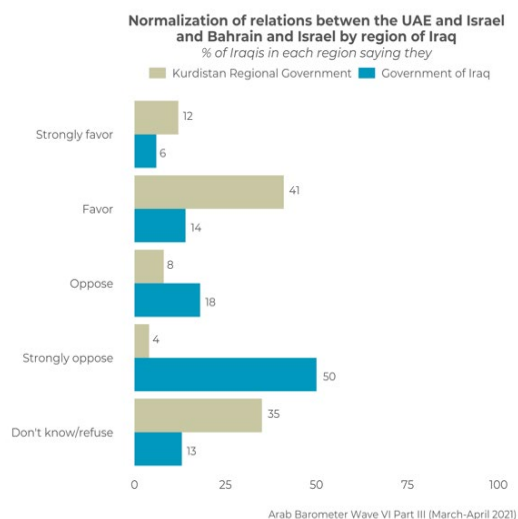
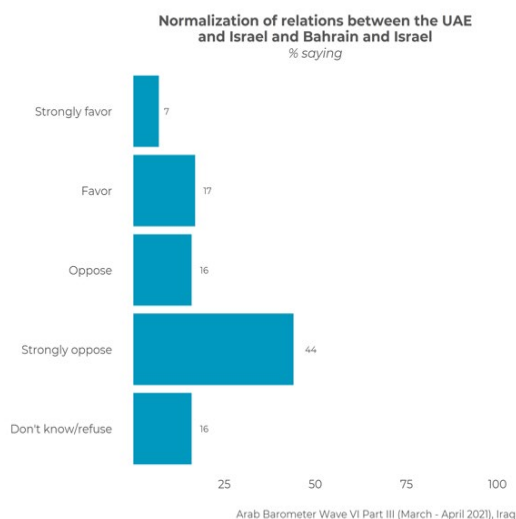
The favorability gap between the U.S. and China persists in ratings of their leaders: 29 percent of Iraqis believe that the foreign policies of American President Joseph Biden have been very good or good for the region, compared with 49 percent who say the same of Chinese President Xi Jinping, making his favorability in Iraq highest among all countries surveyed in spring 2021 in Wave VI. Despite low ratings early on in Biden's term in office, half of all Iraqis (50 percent) believe that his policies toward MENA will be better than his predecessor Donald Trump.



And while China delivered infrastructure contracts and oil bailouts, the United States delivered the Abraham Accords and a normalization agreement between Morocco and Israel, neither of which garner much support among Iraqis overall. Just 24 percent favor the normalization of relations between the



UAE, Bahrain and Israel and just 21 percent favor it between Morocco and Israel. Again, however, and in line with recent calls among Iraqis in the KRI to join the Abraham Accords<sup>8</sup>, support for normalization varies dramatically by region. A majority (53 percent) of those living in the KRI strongly favor or favor the Abraham Accords and 50 percent of citizens in that region feel the same about Morocco's agreement with Israel. In contrast, 19 percent living in the GOI region favor the Abraham accords and 17 percent favor the Morocco agreement.



<sup>8</sup> Rina Bassist. September 24, 2021. "Israel hails declaration by Iraqi group in favor of normalization." *Al-Monitor*.  
<https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/israel-hails-declaration-iraqi-group-favor-normalization>



## 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.

We have been conducting rigorous, and nationally representative public opinion surveys on probability samples of the adult populations across the Arab world since 2006 across 15 countries.

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.



[ARABBAROMETER.ORG](http://ARABBAROMETER.ORG)



[ARABBAROMETER](https://www.facebook.com/ARABBAROMETER)



[@ARABBAROMETER](https://twitter.com/ARABBAROMETER)