

February 2021

KAS PolDiMed Survey 2020

Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean



Trust in Political Institutions in the Middle East and North Africa

What are the Perceptions in the Region?

Executive Summary

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has experienced significant political instability since the beginning of 2019, with significant changes to existing political institutions. Mass protests were common in Algeria and Lebanon while smaller demonstrations took place in other countries. In 2020, governments changed in Tunisia and Lebanon, while Algeria held a presidential election following the deposition of their long-standing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 2019. In Libya, a country long divided by civil war, hostilities ended, at least temporarily, following a ceasefire in October 2020. In Jordan, the government resigned in the same month to prepare the way for new parliamentary elections.

The regional unrest of 2019 and 2020 followed a decade of declining trust in institutions. Regionally, levels of trust in the government had fallen by about 20 points between 2013 and 2018 based on results from Arab Barometer. This trend implies initial hopes of improved and more responsive governments after the 2011 Arab Uprisings appeared to give way to pessimism as, with the exception of Tunisia, most political reforms promised or enacted by government were not fully implemented.

The KAS PolDiMed 2020 survey reveals a more nuanced picture about trust in institutions. Throughout 2020, MENA countries faced significant challenges from COVID. Strong initial responses to control the virus appear to have changed views of citizens toward their governments. Levels of trust in government are now higher than in recent years and appear to track with views on how the government has done managing the pandemic. As governments were relatively effective in stopping the spread of the virus, particularly compared with countries like Spain, Italy and the United States, these results suggest citizens often gained increased confidence in their national authorities.

Yet, levels of trust have not increased universally. Trust in parliament and political parties remains low, which is a concern as both are institutions designed to connect citizens with their government. Building greater confidence in each will require significant changes, including increasing the degree to which they serve their intended functions and better meeting the needs of citizens.

However, levels of trust are higher for a number of other institutions that could serve to help channel the demands of citizens to their leaders. Most citizens say they have high levels of trust in civil society organizations and local religious institutions. Governments across the region should seek cooperation with voluntary organizations or at the very least not impede their work given these findings. International organizations should work to support their efforts while encouraging national governments to do the same.

Additionally, in many countries there is relatively high levels of trust in local and municipal government authorities, especially when compared with parliament. This is especially true in deeply divided countries such as Lebanon and Libya. As both countries seek political reforms to resolve long-standing tensions, devolving power to local and municipal authorities could yield significant benefits for government legitimacy. As international actors engage governments across the region, they should highlight the importance of local government can play in reducing the trust deficit, at least in certain countries.

There is also relatively high trust in institutions designed to ensure law and order. The army remains the most trusted institution across the region while trust in the police is higher than might be expected. The military has long been respected by citizens across the region while levels of trust in the police may be higher given their efforts to combat COVID in recent months.

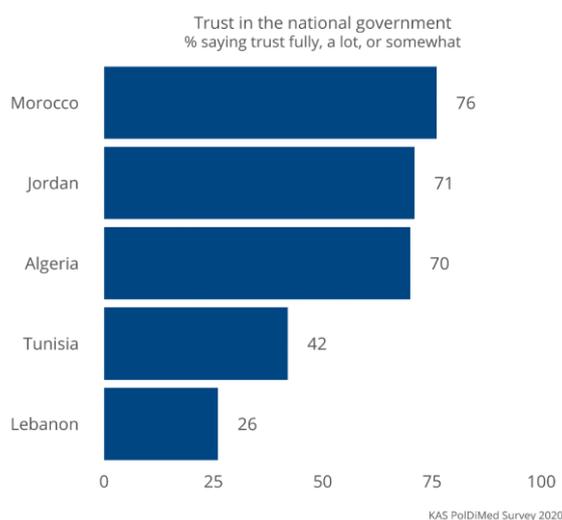
Notably, for most governmental institutions, support doesn't vary widely by age, gender, education, or income. In certain countries, clear differences are apparent, but for the most part, levels of trust in these institutions are relatively similar for most major demographic categories across MENA.

These findings are based on nationally representative public opinion surveys that included approximately 1,800 respondents in six countries: Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia, with a total of 10,841 respondents. Respondents were chosen randomly, meaning the results can be generalized to the broader population. The surveys were weighted to account for any random variations that may exist by gender, age, level of education, or geographic area. The margin of error for each country is less than ± 3 percent. All interviews were conducted between October 26 and December 8, 2020. The surveys were conducted on behalf of the Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS PoDiMed) by Arab Research and Analytics Associates (ARAA).

National Political Institutions

Levels of trust in the national governments varies widely across the region. In Morocco, three-quarters (76 percent) say they trust their government fully, a lot, or somewhat. Levels of confidence are similar in Jordan (71 percent) and Algeria (70 percent), with seven-in-ten saying the same. Unlike Jordan and Morocco, Algeria is not a monarchy and has endured recent political upheavals. Still, the results suggest that citizens have confidence in the authorities in all three countries. However, these results do come with a note of caution – in all three cases, the most common response is “somewhat trust”, indicating that the degree of trust in government remains relatively weak.

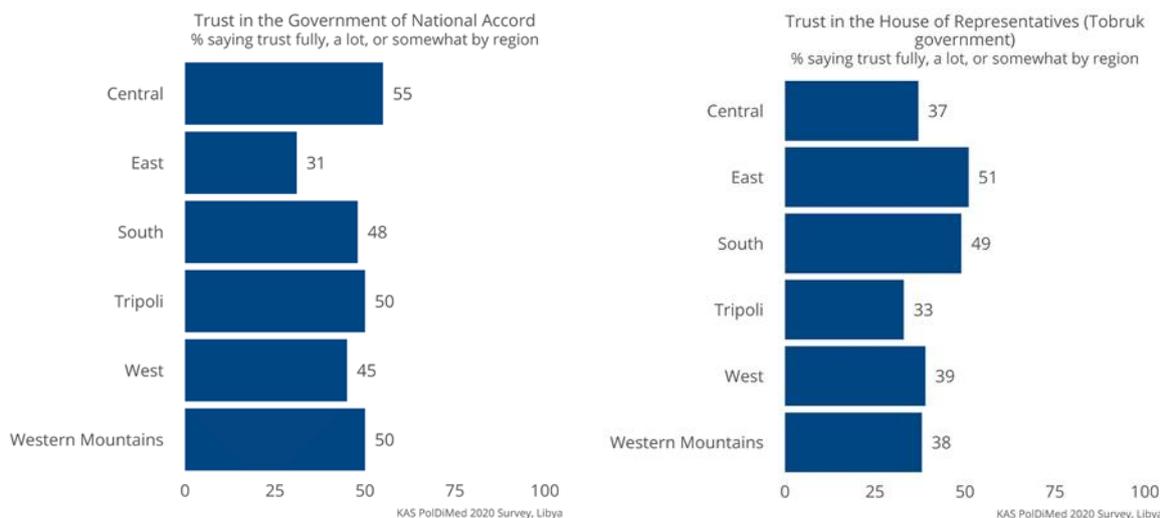
In large part, the relatively high levels of trust in these three countries are likely due to the manner in which the governments have been managing the COVID pandemic. Majorities in all three countries rate the government’s handling of this crisis positively while minorities in blame the government for the spread of the virus in their country.¹ Despite other problems facing the countries, including significant economic issues, it appears that citizens in these countries are more confident in their governments based on their management of this health crisis.



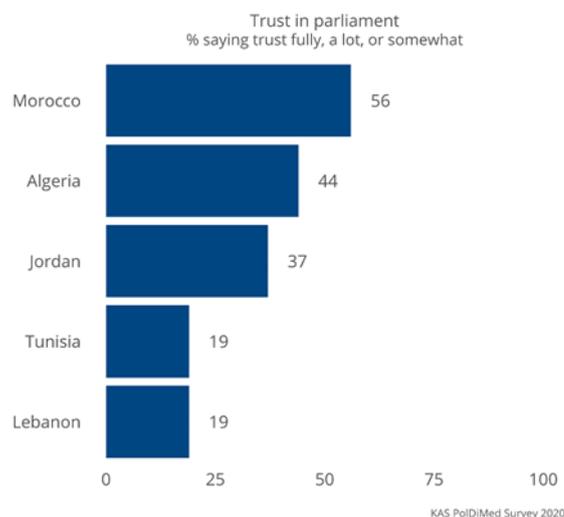
Meanwhile, fewer than half trust the national government in Tunisia (42 percent) or Lebanon (26 percent). Notably, in Tunisia, this level of trust in government is significantly higher in an Arab Barometer survey conducted prior to the 2019 elections that ushered in the new government. Tunisians appear more confident in the new government led by President Kais Saied, a political outsider, compared with the government it replaced.

In Lebanon, confidence in the government remains very low. Given the dire situation in the country with the collapse of the financial system, soaring inflation, the Beirut port explosion, and rising numbers of COVID cases, it comes as little surprise that Lebanese would have very low trust in their national government.

¹ See [The Covid-19 Challenge in the MENA: What are the Perceptions in the Region?](#)



Despite the ceasefire in Libya, two rival governments remained in place claiming legitimacy at the time of the survey. However, the survey results make clear that trust is not significantly higher in one rival government than the other at the national level. Trust in the Government of National Accord (GNA) is 45 percent compared with 42 percent for the House of Representatives (Tobruk government). At the same time, there are important differences across regions of the country. At least 45 percent say they trust the GNA in all regions of the country except the country's east where only 31 percent do. By comparison, trust in the Tobruk government is significantly higher in the country's east (51 percent) and south (49 percent) than in all other regions where fewer than four-in-ten have confidence in this authority. Given the divided nature of support, especially by regions of the country, the newly elected executive authority must include both governments in order to build the confidence of the Libyan people and thus pave the way for the elections scheduled for December 2021.



Across all countries, trust in parliament is substantially lower than for the government overall, which is a long-standing pattern in MENA. Parliaments are typically viewed as weak and ineffectual. Although they play different roles in different political systems, often they receive blame for government failures or are perceived to exist largely to distribute patronage to connections. Rarely are they seen as performing the oversight role which could improve the quality of governance, which likely explains the lower levels of trust in these institutions.

Trust in parliament is highest in Morocco, where a slight majority (56 percent) say they trust this institution fully, a lot, or somewhat. Morocco's parliament has relatively stronger parties than in many other countries in MENA and includes parties from a variety of different backgrounds. Although all legal parties are largely supportive of the existing system, there is a broader spectrum of established parties that have representation in parliament than in most other MENA countries. Likely these factors, combined with the government's overall strong performance on COVID, has resulted in relatively higher levels of trust in parliament.

Elsewhere, fewer than half trust their parliaments. Algerians are the next most likely to do so, with 44 percent having confidence in this institution. The significant political upheaval in the country combined with the government's relatively strong performance on COVID are the likely causes of this relatively higher support. However, it is clear that the Algerian parliament does not enjoy the same level of trust as the Algerian government overall.

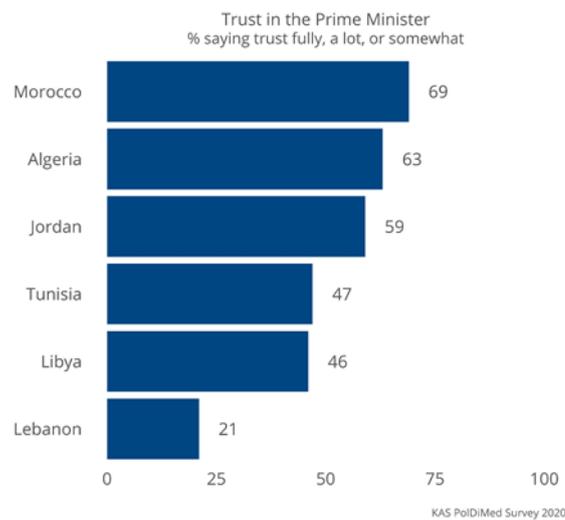
In Jordan, only 37 percent trust the newly elected parliament. Historically, public opinion in Jordan has not been favorable toward parliament and this level suggests that the new parliament does not begin with a strong mandate stemming from the November 10 general election. As in other countries, it is critical for Jordan's parliament to be perceived as delivering results for citizens to increase levels of confidence.

In Lebanon and Tunisia, levels of trust in parliament are far lower, with only 19 percent having confidence in their legislature in both countries. For Tunisia, the most democratic country in the region, this low level raises significant concern for the country's future. Despite the fact that the country's parliament was freely elected, the institution inspires very little trust among the public. The failure of parliament to address the country's economic challenges, combined with relatively weak attachment to political parties are major factors driving this low level of confidence. The same holds true in Lebanon, which has more meaningful elections than most other countries in MENA. Perceptions of widespread corruption and parliament's failure to improve the financial situation or to prevent the port explosion is linked with poor overall perception. It seems clear that citizens in both countries have higher expectations than are being met by these institutions at present.

In Libya, trust in the General National Congress (GNC) is also low, with only a third trusting it fully, a lot, or somewhat. In effect, given the civil war and division of the country, the GNC has not been functioning in a meaningful manner similar to other legislatures. Thus, trust in the institution is more likely the result of its historical failures or hopes that it could again serve its function. In all regions of the country, this level falls between 27 percent and 37 percent. Given the relatively low level of trust in this institution, combined with the equal levels of trust in Libya's two rival governments, building national institutions with high levels of trust will prove challenging.

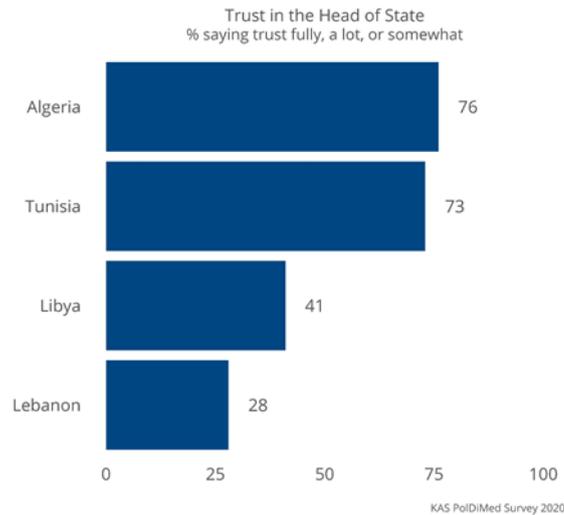
Trust in Political Leaders

Levels of trust in Prime Ministers vary widely across MENA. Moroccans are most trusting of their Prime Minister, Saad-Eddine El Othmani, with more than two-thirds (69 percent) having confidence in him. Additionally, a majority of Algerians (63 percent) also have trust in this office. Likely, given the relatively good job both governments are doing in the eyes of their respective publics on managing COVID, citizens in both countries have greater confidence in these officials. The other country where the Prime Minister enjoys the confidence of the majority is Jordan. In this case, at the time of the survey, Bisher Al Khawawaneh had recently been appointed as the prime minister to oversee the upcoming elections and to more effectively tackle the COVID pandemic. He begins his time in office with moderate confidence among the Jordanian public.



Meanwhile, slightly fewer than half of citizens in Tunisia (47 percent) and Libya (46 percent) trust their Prime Minister. In Tunisia, this is likely related to the fact that Hichem Mechichi assumed office relatively recently before the survey was fielded and the fact he replaced a figure embroiled in an alleged conflict-of-interest scandal. In Libya, the recent ceasefire and hopes for a return to a more stable political environment likely also benefited Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj in the eyes of ordinary Libyans back in the fall of 2020.

Trust in the Prime Minister is lowest in Lebanon (21 percent), where Hassan Diab is currently serving as a caretaker after submitting his resignation following the Beirut port explosion. Given widespread frustration in Lebanon about the state of political affairs and the perceived negligence of the government in creating the underlying conditions for the port explosion, there is low confidence in the political class in Lebanon, including the Prime Minister.



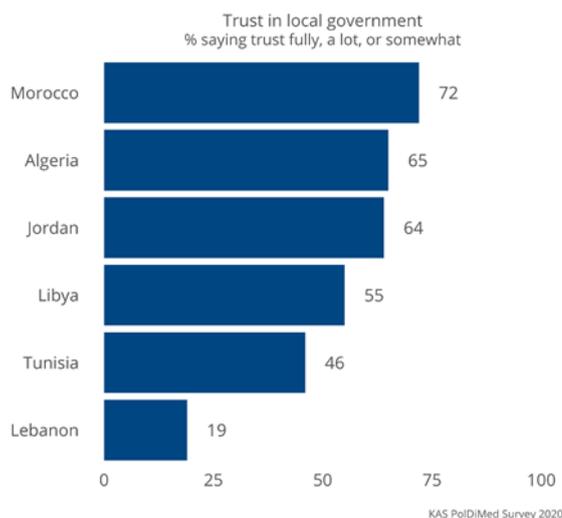
Levels of trust in the respective heads of state across the region are typically somewhat higher than for prime minister. In Algeria (76 percent) and Tunisia (73 percent), trust in the respective presidents is relatively higher. In Algeria, this may be due to the effect of the 2019 hirak movement and the resultant changes. Although President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has links with the old regime, he replaced a president who had been incapacitated with a stroke yet continued to serve. His COVID diagnosis may also have led to some sympathy from the general public. Ultimately, although Tebboune has not fully met the demands of the hirak, he has overseen some reforms and appears to enjoy relatively greater confidence among Algerians than the former president.

In Tunisia, President Kais Saied is a political outsider who ran on a platform of injecting radical change into the system. In a time of very low confidence in the government overall, his outsider status, statements against vested interests, and desire to return power to the people appear to have inspired greater trust than other actors in the political system. Accordingly, his popularity is significantly higher than other actors in the Tunisian government.

Meanwhile, trust in the head of state is much lower in Libya and Lebanon. In Libya, there were competing heads of state during the period that the survey was conducted and no one held the former office of president. This situation has now changed since the appointment of the Presidential Council by the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum but given the timing the survey results are not reflective of these political changes. In December, the level of confidence was similar to the prime minister, suggesting there is a relatively consistent level of trust toward political leaders in Libya following the ceasefire. In Lebanon, trust in the head of state is again the lowest (28 percent) across the countries surveyed, again highlighting the lack of faith in the entire political system. However, support is somewhat higher than for the office of the prime minister, which is a trend across most of the countries surveyed.

Trust in Local Government

Trust in government at the local level is largely similar to the national level. In part, this may be due to the fact that many countries across the region have a unitary system of government instead of one that is decentralized. In effect, there may be less differentiation by citizens between levels of government in a country like Tunisia, where governors are chosen by the central government. This trend stands in contrast to more federal systems, where local authorities are often, but not always, more trusted than national authorities, which may be seen as remote and out of touch with local conditions.



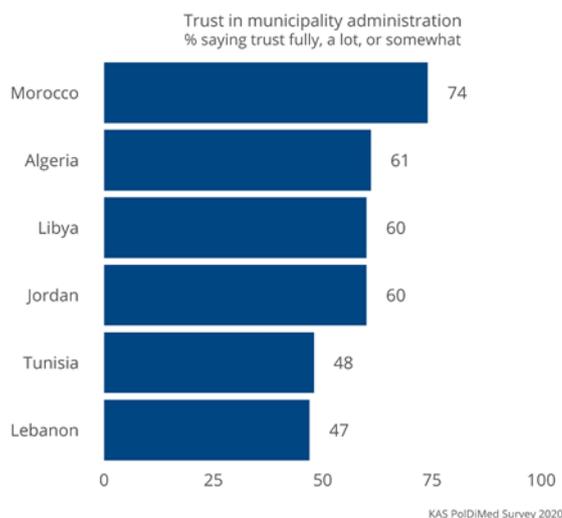
As with trust in the national government, Moroccans, Algerians, and Jordanians are the most likely to say they trust government at the local level. In Morocco, 72 percent say they trust local authorities fully, a lot, or somewhat, compared with nearly two-thirds in Algeria (65 percent) and Jordan (64 percent). In both countries, trust is slightly lower than at the national level, but not by a substantial margin.

A key exception to this pattern is Libya, where there is no unified and functioning national government. In this case, trust in the local authorities is higher than for the two main rival governments. Likely, this greater trust is due to the fact that local authorities have been forced to address problems to a greater extent, working to find solutions in very difficult circumstances. These results suggest that reconciliation at the national level in Libya could benefit from decentralization and greater inclusion of local government officials in the process, as they appear to enjoy greater legitimacy in the eyes of citizens.

In Tunisia, trust in local government (46 percent) is four points higher than at the national level. Again, this similarity may be a function of the system of government Tunisia has, with relatively little differentiation between levels of government given the political system. Finally, in Lebanon, 19 percent trust the local government, which is 7 points lower than for the national government, underscoring the low levels of trust in government at multiple levels in the country.

The findings for trust in the municipal administration are relatively similar as to local government with the exception of Lebanon. Majorities in Morocco (74 percent), Algeria (61 percent), Libya (60 percent), and Jordan say they trust city administration fully, a lot, or somewhat. For Morocco, Algeria, and Jordan, these results imply that citizens do not view government dramatically differently regardless of the level or function, while in Libya it reinforces the importance of municipal authorities at a time the national government is largely unable to meet the basic needs of citizens.

Views of government performance do not vary consistently by age or income levels, but there is some evidence that those with a university education are less likely to approve of the government's efforts than those who have lower levels of education. Significant differences are found in Morocco (-12 points), Jordan (-8 points), and Tunisia (-7 points), for example. It may be that those who are better educated are more likely to view government efforts critically or that they are better informed about current events and thus less likely to rate the government positively in light of the ongoing second wave of infections. If the latter is true, then it suggests that satisfaction with government performance on COVID may have decreased after the time of the survey as the true scale of the pandemic became more evident to all citizens.



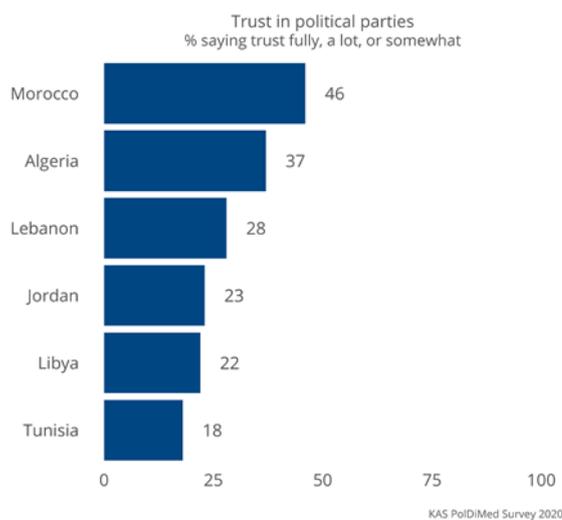
In Tunisia, the results closely mirror local government with 48 percent having trust in municipal government, which is two points higher than local government, meaning the difference falls within the margin of error for the survey.

The primary exception to this pattern is found in Lebanon, where nearly half say they trust the municipality administration, which is roughly twice as high as the level of trust found at any other level of the government. In effect, it appears that Lebanese differentiate between politicians and the civil servants who are working in their city administration. The fact that municipal authorities are viewed most positively likely relates to sectarian considerations. Local authorities are more likely to share the same religious identity as those living in their city compared with those in national government where government positions are divided across sects. The strength of sectarian identity and the degree to which this plays a role in the Lebanese system likely leads to this differentiation in levels of trust at different levels of government.

Notably, one of the common suggestions for political reform in Lebanon relates to greater decentralization. Given the higher levels of confidence in municipal authorities, the results suggest that such a system might yield potential benefits in the eyes of citizens if this empowers city officials to have greater power in decision-making.

Other Key Institutions

Beyond the government itself, the survey included questions to probe levels of trust in other key institutions that have influence in the political system. One such institution is political parties, which are essential for the function of a democratic political system. In all countries surveyed, fewer than half of citizens trust political parties fully, a lot, or somewhat. This continues a long-standing trend across MENA found in Arab Barometer data showing that political parties are largely discredited. In part, this outcome stems from the limitations of parties across MENA to develop a broad base or platform that seeks to improve the lives of citizens. Instead, they are frequently seen as vehicles for the personal interests of a politician or as shells to support non-democratic regimes.



Levels of trust in political parties are highest in Morocco (46 percent) and Algeria (37 percent). In Morocco, a relatively stable party system where party identification is relatively higher, including for the PJD (Justice and Development Party) and other long-standing parties may account for this result. In Algeria, political parties have typically not enjoyed significant trust in Arab Barometer surveys. However, political openings resulting from the *hirak* may have inspired greater hope and confidence in the role political parties can play in the future of Algeria.

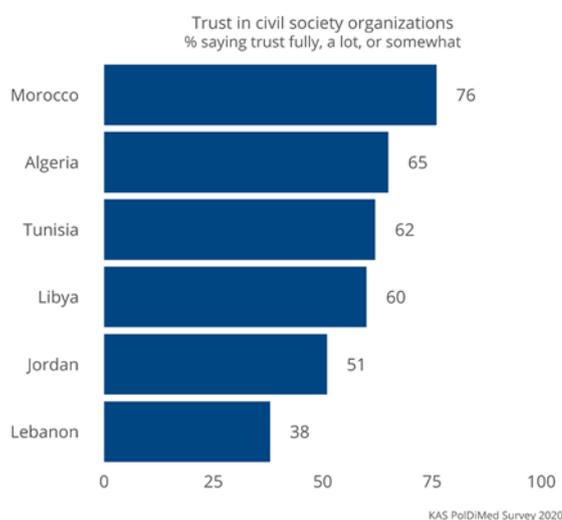
Levels of trust in political parties is somewhat higher in Lebanon than for many other governmental institutions at 28 percent. Lebanon's political system is strongly defined by political parties attached to a sectarian identity and many parties have strong societal linkages, including prominent examples like Hezbollah, Amal Movement, the Free Patriotic Movement, and the Future Movement, among others. Despite the discrediting of the country's politicians, a small but substantial percentage of citizens appears to retain faith in political parties that are perceived to represent their interests.

In the cases of Jordan (23 percent), Libya (22 percent), and Tunisia (18 percent), only about one-in-five citizens has confidence in political parties. In Jordan, political parties have been weak historically due to the nature of the electoral system which is dominated by independents and tribal candidates. The main historical party is the Islamic Action Front, which has historic links with the Muslim Brotherhood. However, parties receive relatively little vote share and fewer than 10 percent of new parliamentarians are affiliated with a party, which contributes to low levels of trust in political parties in Jordan.

For Libya, this low level of trust is likely linked with the fact that parties were banned under the Qaddafi regime, leading to no historical linkages with the population. The new parties that did form were incapable of stopping the chaos that resulted from the transition after 2011. Beyond operating in a stable domestic context, parties will need to demonstrate to the population that they can bring positive change to the political system to increase levels of trust.

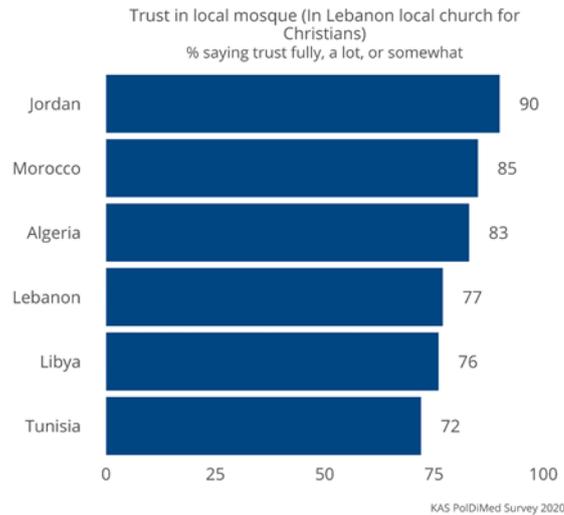
In Tunisia, it appears that political parties are a causality of the ongoing transition that has been underway since 2011. At the time of the revolution, citizens had high hopes that a multiparty political system could address the economic shortcomings and high levels of corruption associated with the Ben Ali regime. The result has been one of political stagnation that has failed to bring the dramatic changes citizens had wanted. Compromise across political parties has proved difficult, with citizens perceiving many governments to be largely ineffectual dating back to the troika government. As political parties have struggled to gain hold in the new system or prove their utility in channeling demands, parties remain distrusted and citizens have started to look to leaders from outside the political system like President Kais Saied.

While politicians and political parties are largely distrusted, key actors in other areas enjoy substantially greater levels of trust. For example, majorities trust civil society organizations (CSOs) in all countries except Lebanon. In Morocco, fully three-quarters (76 percent) trust CSOs as do roughly two-thirds in Algeria (65 percent), 62 percent in Tunisia, and 60 percent in Libya. In Jordan, about half (51 percent) trust these organizations. Only in Lebanon does less than 38 percent trust CSOs, although this level is substantially higher than trust in the national government.

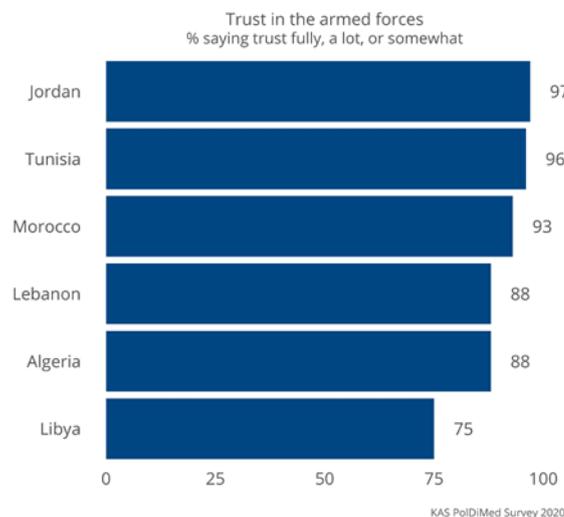


This relatively high level of trust is likely related to the perceptions about civil society. Results from the Arab Barometer fifth wave demonstrate that in 11 of 12 Arab countries surveyed, citizens were significantly more likely to say that CSOs were doing all they could to provide citizens with basic services compared with the government. Given the relatively poor economic outcomes over recent decades, it appears that the perception that CSOs are working to help citizens has inspired substantial confidence in such organizations in most countries.

However, local religious institutions enjoy an even higher level of trust than do CSOs. In all countries surveyed, at least seven-in-ten trust their local mosque or church fully, a lot, or somewhat. In Jordan, nine-in-ten do, which may be linked with the importance that the monarchy, which descends from the Prophet Mohammed, places on religion in the country. Similarly, in Morocco, where religion is held up as part of the national motto (God, Homeland, King), 85 percent say they trust their local mosque, as do 83 percent in Algeria. In Lebanon, where sectarian identity structures much of social and political life, local churches and mosques are widely trusted (77 percent) while the same is true in Libya (76 percent). Even in Tunisia, which has the highest percentage of citizens who describe themselves as 'not religious' in MENA, the vast majority still maintain confidence in religious institutions. Thus, it is clear that religious institutions continue to enjoy substantial confidence among Arab publics.

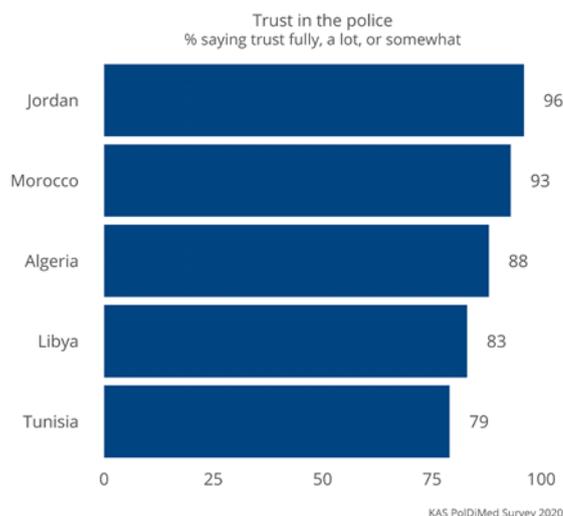


Nevertheless, the institution that retains the greatest trust across MENA is the armed forces. At least three-quarters of citizens in all countries have confidence in this institution. In Tunisia, the army is nearly universally supported (96 percent) and the same holds true in Morocco (93 percent). Despite deep sectarian divisions in Lebanon, the vast majority (88 percent) trust the armed forces. Additionally, 88 percent of Algerians say the same, despite the leading role members of the armed forces played in the regime of the ousted President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. In part, trust in the armed forces is likely the result of recruitment in Algeria taking place in all areas and from all classes, leading to a greater integration of active and former military personnel in Algerian society.



Even in Libya, three-quarters say they trust the armed forces despite the long-standing civil conflict and warring parties. This largely unwavering support for the military, even in a recent conflict zone, is a hallmark of Arab publics. In all Arab Barometer surveys dating back to 2006, the military has been by far the most trusted institution across the region.

The police are another institution intended to uphold law and order. As with the armed forces, the police enjoy a substantial amount of trust among Arab publics relative to other institutions of government. Levels of trust are highest in Morocco (93 percent), followed by Algeria (88 percent), Libya (83 percent), and Tunisia (79 percent). In Lebanon, the two agencies that serve the role of police, the Directorate of General Security (87 percent) and the Internal Security Forces (79 percent), enjoy similar levels of trust.



This relatively high level of confidence in the police may be somewhat surprising, especially given the role that security forces have played in cracking down on dissidents in some countries. However, Arab Barometer data has found a growing concern about security across many MENA countries, with ratings of government being linked with the degree to which the government is able to provide security for its citizens in the period before the outbreak of COVID. As concerns about crime grow in the region, it appears that confidence is growing in the region’s police forces. Additionally, the role the police have played in trying to enforce COVID-related restrictions may play a role given the relatively strong support Arab publics have shown for governments that have taken decisive action to combat the virus.

Conclusion

Trust is one of the most essential factors that can lead to good governance and promotes strong economic outcomes. In Italy, Robert Putnam has shown how lower levels of trust can lead to negative outcomes in terms of quality of governance. The low levels of trust for many institutions across MENA, particularly those designed to channel demands of citizens to their governments such as political parties and parliaments, is deeply concerning.

Yet, there are also signs of hope. After a decade of declining trust in the national government, levels of trust now appear higher. Most likely, this is due to the role that governments have played in combating the COVID pandemic, as levels of trust in government tend to be relatively similar to ratings of performance on combatting the virus.² If national governments can continue to be effective, or at least demonstrate to citizens they have done all they can to limit its spread, then it may be possible for them to reverse this long-term decline and benefit from greater trust in the years ahead.

The KAS PolDiMed survey has also identified a number of other key actors that could play a significant role in rebuilding from the challenges of the pandemic. Voluntary organizations, such as civil society organizations and local religious institutions, have significant legitimacy in the eyes of ordinary citizens. International actors should encourage governments to work with these organizations, or at least not discourage them, as they seek to improve the quality of lives for citizens. Given the weakness of political parties, these voluntary organizations could serve the critical purpose of helping advocate for the needs of citizens and working with governments to find policy solutions to the most pressing issues facing Arab publics.

Additionally, the results underscore the importance of local authorities in deeply divided societies. In Lebanon and Libya, local or municipal authorities are far more trusted than national institutions. Devolving power to this level of government could be an important solution toward building greater confidence in government overall. As each country pursues political reform, international actors should highlight the importance of working with local authorities to address low levels of trust in these countries.

² See [The Covid-19 Challenge in the MENA: What are the Perceptions in the Region?](#)

Conducted by:

Arab Research and Analytics Associates (ARAA) is a collaborative team of analysts specializing in public opinion research in the Middle East and North Africa. Its team combine decades of experience surveying this region in more than 20 countries. ARAA works with its clients to gather reliable and accurate data on public opinion across the region. ARAA has conducted surveys on behalf of Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Stanford University, and Deakin University, among others. For more information, visit www.araaconsulting.com or contact info@araaconsulting.com.



About KAS PoDiMed:

The **Regional Program Political Dialogue South Mediterranean** of the **Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS PoDiMed)** implements transnational projects from Tunisia with reference to the entire area of the southern (Maghreb) and eastern Mediterranean (Mashrek). It is designed to strengthen political dialogue, social and economic integration in the region and to promote long-term partnership with the European Union. The Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung is a non-governmental German political foundation with over 100 offices worldwide and 12 programs in the MENA region. Nationally and internationally, we work for peace, freedom and justice through political education. The consolidation of democracy and development cooperation are our particular concerns. For more information, visit www.kas.de/poldimed or contact info.poldimed@kas.de.



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