The Arab Barometer uses in-depth public opinion surveys to track attitudes in Arab countries with respect to pluralism, freedom, conceptions of governance and democracy, civic and political participation, social and religious values. Survey waves were carried out in 2006-08 and in 2010-11. This third wave, conducted in 2012-early 2014, puts in perspective deep trends beyond the turbulence of daily events. See more at www.arabbarometer.org and www.arab-reform.net.

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Foreign influence in the Middle East: changes in perceptions and expectations

Mathilde Dugit-Gros*

Executive Summary

Has Western involvement in the Arab Spring generated more scepticism in North Africa and the Middle East? What has been the impact of the Arab Spring on the perception of the West? This study compares public opinion of foreign influence across five MENA countries: Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia, as a sample representing significantly different patterns of popular mobilisation in recent years. Using public opinion data from the Arab Barometer second and third waves, the study examines the evolving perceptions of foreign actors pre- and post-2011, revealing how different levels of foreign influence in the region have affected popular aspirations and expectations towards the West.

The study finds that the Arab Spring has served to reprioritize the goals and objectives of the general public: instead of fighting against foreign interference, popular opinion places emphasis on internal challenges such as economic growth, stability, and reform. Nonetheless, most countries surveyed here have grown increasingly sceptical of the effects of foreign influence on reform paths or democratic development, and of the West’s intentions. Only Libya, and to some extent Yemen, see an increasingly positive perception of foreign action on democratic development.

* Mathilde Dugit-Gros is a Masters student at Sciences Po Paris and ARI researcher.
While faith in the benign intentions of foreign actors has diminished since the Arab Spring, public support for violent actions against the West has considerably diminished. With regards to future relations with the United States specifically, the countries studied here mostly wish for increased economic ties. In terms of foreign policy, the public shows a preference for a U.S. non-interference approach in political affairs rather than a foreign policy based on promoting democracy or women’s rights in their country. Half of the population in the countries investigated favours a withdrawal of the US from the region, though a small share would still like to see greater American involvement in solving the Arab-Israeli conflict or containing Iran.

Introduction

1. The Arab Barometer, waves II and III

The Arab Barometer\(^1\) is an indicator built through the collaboration of multiple research centres and aims at producing reliable data on the politically relevant attitudes of citizens throughout the Middle East and North Africa. This paper looked at data from the second and third waves of the Arab Barometer, respectively carried out in 2010-2011, shortly before and during the popular uprisings in the region commonly known as the “Arab Spring”, and in late 2012-early 2014. This last wave, recently released, elucidates trends in Arab public opinion in the aftermath of these events and allows us, for the first time, to look at their evolution and speculate on the impact these events had on the perceptions and aspirations of Middle Eastern and North African populations.

2. Selected countries

This paper examines five countries: Iraq, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Tunisia. These countries have been selected for comparison not only because of their significantly different experiences of social mobilisation and political change throughout the period in question, but also due to the very different levels of Western involvement they have experienced.

On average 1,100 to 1,200 citizens were surveyed in each country, randomly selected in order to produce nationally representative data.

\(^1\) See more at [http://www.arab-reform.net/arab-democracy-barometer-0](http://www.arab-reform.net/arab-democracy-barometer-0) or on the Arab Barometer website [http://www.arabbarometer.org/](http://www.arabbarometer.org/)
3. Defining the subject

As the Arab Spring drew the attention of and triggered a wide range of actions and reactions from various Western governments, to what extent did the perception of foreign influence and its desirability change among Arab populations? Different hypotheses are plausible. Influence and interference by military, political, diplomatic, or media forces have sometimes been seen as providing support, by amplifying the demands of the people that mobilised for political change and putting pressure on their governments. However, external intervention has often been perceived as a spoiler, dividing the reformist or revolutionary movements, distorting their messages, or creating barriers to change due to economic or political support offered to the regimes in place.

Certainly, the influence of foreign actors has not been uniform, either across countries or across time – something which is in fact reflected in public opinion. Yet, studying the Arab Barometer allows us first to have an overview of the average perception of foreign influence among MENA citizens, and second to see the evolution of this average opinion before and after the 2011 uprisings and subsequent events.

The purpose of this study is to compare the current perceptions of foreign influence across countries and analyse their evolution pre- and post-2011. This indicates how various levels of involvement have influenced perceptions and the expected role of foreign actors, particularly Western ones, in the region after the Arab Spring.

4. Limitations

Using data from five specific countries only, one cannot claim to speak about the so-called “Arab street” or to give a representative vision of how the West is perceived by publics throughout the region. The concept of “influence” may manifest in many different shapes and degrees, and it is hard to speak of a “majority” when statistical data hovers around the 50% mark and when the wording of questions can be interpreted in different ways. Nonetheless, the comparative dimension of this statistical analysis allows us to apprehend cross-country tendencies and evolutions across time and events.
Libya remains excluded from the 2010-2011 analysis, as it was not possible to conduct surveys in the country prior to the revolution. The third wave of the Arab Barometer was the first time Libya was included.

It should also be noted that in the majority of the findings reported here, respondent answers “don’t know” and “refuse to answer” (which made up around 5% of responses to most questions) were omitted from the graphs. This decision was taken in order to render findings clearer.

Findings

1. Curbing foreign interference: a top priority?

To put nationalist voices into perspective, we consider whether citizens of the selected countries consider curbing foreign interference a top priority for their country.

With the exception of Libya and Iraq, who were recently subjected to foreign military intervention, concerns about foreign interference are by no means a top priority. Barely 1% of citizens in Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia and Yemen consider curbing foreign interference as the first or second biggest challenge for their country. Meanwhile, it is the second most important challenge for between 3% and 16% of citizens in Egypt, Tunisia and Yemen, 20% in Libya, and 31% of Iraqi respondents.

Libya’s result is one of the most striking: in 2014, 16% considered foreign interference to be their country’s first challenge and 20% the second. Financial and administrative corruption and economic issues were the first and second top priorities in Libyan public opinion.
Concerning Iraq, the issue remains high: about a third of the Iraqi citizens chose *curbing foreign interference* as their country’s second most important priority.

Curbing foreign interference’s importance has remained unchanged since the Arab Spring. As in the surveys conducted around the period of the Arab Spring, fewer than 1% of citizens say this is the most important challenge today. Only Iraq is growing more concerned about this matter: the share of those who placed *curbing foreign influence* as their country’s second highest priority almost tripled (12% to 31%) between 2011 and 2013.

Unsurprisingly, the overwhelming majority of respondents, regardless of their nationality, places either the economic situation (65%) or financial and administrative corruption (20% on average and above 30% for Libya and Iraq) as their country’s most important challenges. Achieving stability usually comes next.

Thus, one should not overestimate the importance of fighting foreign influence in the perception of these countries’ agendas: economic, governance, and stability challenges remain central in the public mind. However, the cases of Libya and Iraq show that, in countries where military interventions have taken place, the fight against foreign interference remains important. Although local media and political voices undoubtedly play on “foreign enemy” discourses, which may influence public opinion in that regard, countries who experienced the most direct, coercive, and prolonged kinds of intervention seem more conscious of the necessity of restoring national sovereignty.

2. **Foreign influence: positive or negative impact?**

The following questions compare perceptions of three foreign actors across time – the United States, the European Union, and neighbouring countries – and look at whether public opinion views their influence on democratic development as positive.

- American influence

Although it is difficult to speak of trends in the sample, only one country, Libya, out of five in 2013-14, had an overall positive perception of the United States’ influence on the development of democracy in their country. Opinion in Yemen was relatively evenly divided, with a slightly larger percentage holding a positive (36%) as opposed to negative (31%) view. Egyptians mainly considered that American influence had been negative, though slightly less
negative than in 2011, as did Iraqis and Tunisians where the US was viewed more negatively than in 2011 (+7 and +23 points respectively).

In Egypt in 2013, 38% considered that American influence had mostly a negative impact on the development of democracy. Overall, however, the evolution of this perception is not very clear: although positive perception was 8 points higher in 2011, negative perception changed only slightly (4 points). More interestingly, 28% declined to give a clear answer, which may be due to the multiple areas and means of US influence, or to the plurality of political views that developed in the country following two waves of political turmoil. It is possible to suggest that, rather than rising anti-Americanism, there is rising uncertainty or scepticism towards the US influence on democratic developments in Egypt.

Iraq, as might be expected, most strongly believes that US influence on democratic development has been negative (54%); it has the highest score for “negative” perception among all observed countries. Nevertheless, it does not have the lowest level of “positive” perception (26%) among them, which suggests Iraqi public opinion is divided on this matter. Looking at trends, negative perceptions of US influence have clearly grown in Iraq since 2011 (47% to 54%), while positive and neutral perceptions dropped in smaller proportions. The inaction of the United States in the face of Iraq’s ongoing political chaos, including a civil war
and the divisive US-backed Al Maliki government, probably contributed to this increasingly negative image.

Libya offers an interesting comparison to Iraq. Contrary to Iraq, which also experienced US military intervention, half of citizens say that the US had an overall positive influence on the development of democracy in their country. It also has one of the lowest scores in terms of negative perception (21%), a 10-point difference with the second most negative opinion (by Yemenis) in this 2013-2014 selection.

Tunisia shows a clear shift from more positive perceptions (30% positive vs. 20% negative) in 2011 to an overwhelmingly negative opinion of the US’s influence on the development of democracy in 2013 (43% negative vs. 21% positive). Although it did not experience direct foreign intervention, the first echoes the Tunisian revolution had in Europe and North America, particularly in the media, may have increased the Tunisian public’s scepticism towards the West.

Though it remains divided, public opinion in Yemen went from a rather balanced perception of US influence on the development of democracy in 2011 to a slightly more positive perception (36% positive vs. 31% negative) in 2013.

- The European Union’s influence

![Graph showing perception of foreign influence on democracy](image-url)
In general, perceptions of US and EU influences on the development of democracy are quite similar within a given country, although perceptions of the EU tend to be slightly more balanced between positive and negative opinions.

In Egypt in 2013, almost one-third (31%) found the European Union’s influence on democratic development to be negative. This is about the same level as in 2011, but considering that the share of positive opinion dropped by 13 points, it appears that views of the European Union’s influence in Egypt worsened after the 2011 revolution.

In 2013, Iraq has one of the most negative perceptions of the EU (38%), equally with Tunisia. Looking at the evolution of this perception shows that as with the US, scepticism towards the EU’s role in democratic development has increased over time, with the share of positive opinion among Iraqis shrinking from 25% to 20% – even lower than for the US.

On the contrary, Libya harbours a quite different perception: 52% of Libyans considered the influence of the EU on the development of democracy to be positive, and less than 20% had a negative opinion of European efforts, which is the lowest level among all five countries in 2013-4.

Similar to the perception of the US, public opinion in Tunisia has shifted from a rather positive perception of European influence on its democratic development prior the revolution (36% positive, 15% negative) to a mostly negative one in 2013 (26% positive vs. 38% negative).

Finally, surprisingly enough, the opinion of Yemenis towards the EU’s influence on democratic development in the country has become significantly more positive over time, with 40% of citizens holding positive opinions in 2013, and the difference between positive and negative perceptions growing from 9 to 14 points since 2011.

• Neighbouring countries’ influence

In order to put these perceptions of Western influences in perspective, it is useful to compare them to perceptions of neighbouring countries’ influence – broadly defined. In general, countries which had the most negative opinion of Western influence have a similarly or even more negative opinion of their neighbours’ influence.
Although opinions of neighbours’ influence on democratic developments in Egypt remains is somewhat positive (for about one in three Egyptians), this positive perception has decreased by 8 points since 2011. Negative views, on the other hand, remained constant, while neutral or undecided levels increased. This might be due to the diversity of influences between or even within neighbouring countries, as a wide range of foreign actors, particularly in the Gulf, have links to different Egyptian political actors and exert varying pressures on political developments in Egypt.

Iraqis’ opinions on the influence of its neighbours on democratic development is widely negative, and although these figures have decreased since 2011, 56% of the Iraqis still have a negative view. Positive perceptions, on the other hand, remained largely unchanged, increasing somewhat from 8% to 12% during this period. This is in part due to the various interventions of neighbouring actors in the civil unrest in Iraq (like Hezbollah, Kurdish groups linked to Turkey, Iranian lobbies, or Syria and the spillover of its refugee crisis and extremist movements, etc.), which have had disruptive implications for Iraq’s democratic development.

Libya, by contrast, has an overwhelmingly positive opinion of its neighbours and their influence on democratisation: in 2014, 55% of Libyans thought their neighbours had a positive role on the country’s democratic developments, versus 17% with a negative opinion.
Although Tunisia was, in 2011, generally neutral or inclined to a positive perception of its neighbours’ influence on democratic developments (30% and 35% of the respondents respectively), this tendency clearly shifted after the 2011 revolution, where negative perceptions became the most dominant (35%). Thus, one can argue that Tunisians grew sceptical, not only of Western influences on its political developments, but in general of any kind of interference in its affairs.

Finally, Yemen’s perception of neighbouring countries and their influence on its democratic development became increasingly positive, increasing from 28% in 2011 to 41% in 2013. Negative perceptions also increased somewhat, but by just 5 points to 31%. This polarisation of opinion can probably be attributed to the North-South fracture that exists in the country since its reunification, where some of the population has “benefitted” from foreign influences (mainly from Saudi Arabia) while some did not.

3. Reform and foreign intervention: perceived role and desirability

What role would the public like for foreign actors to play in their country? If curbing foreign influence is not necessarily a priority in the five countries under examination, does it mean that this influence, and specifically foreign demands for reform, are acceptable?
The following sets of questions look at the relationship between foreign influence and internal reform paths, whether the former has a positive effect on the latter in the eyes of the public, and if this external influence is desirable.

**a. Is foreign interference an obstacle to reform?**

In 2013-4, an average of 75% across the five countries studied here viewed foreign interference as obstructing reform efforts in their country.

Iraq has a remarkably high proportion of citizens (86%) who consider foreign influence to be an obstacle to their reform efforts.

In Libya, Egypt, and Yemen, about three-in-four say foreign influence was an obstacle to reform.

Relatively fewer Tunisians say foreign interference is an obstacle to reform. However, nearly two-thirds (65%) still hold this view.

In all countries except Egypt, publics have grown more and more sceptical of the degree to which foreign actors have had a positive influence on their paths to reform since 2011. This is particularly true in Tunisia, where the share of those saying foreign inference is an obstacle rose from 47% to 65% in 2013.

**b. Should outside actors influence Arab countries’ reform paths?**

There is no consensus on whether extern actors should have an influence on reforms in the five countries studied; nonetheless, two trends are worth mentioning.

On the one hand, three out of the five countries in our focus found foreign demands for reform unacceptable: Egypt (48%), Iraq (56%), and Tunisia (56%). In Yemen, equal percentages say external demands for reform are acceptable and unacceptable (47% each).

On the other hand, Yemen and Libya display unexpectedly high rates of acceptance for external demands for reform (47% and 57% respectively), compared to about a third of the respondents in Egypt, Iraq, and Tunisia.
In the cases of Yemen and Libya, foreign influence on the regimes may have been considered a means of leverage for popular demands against closed decision-making arenas. In Libya specifically, one could argue that strong international pressures have certainly given momentum to movements who were asking for political change at the expense of the Gadhafi regime.

On the other hand, countries where publics hold a negative view of foreign demands for reform may feel their interests or desires don’t align with those of foreign actors, or that they have sufficient power (through representation, successful lobbying, etc.) to translate them into political changes.

Because the question “are the external demands for reform acceptable?” does not specify Western pressures for democratisation (there are also strong lobbies from neighbouring countries and the Gulf, harbouring at times very different agendas), we can surmise that the public’s understanding of these interventions may be varied. The above figures reveal the general scepticism of the public towards external actors playing the role of advocates for change in the internal functioning of their country.
4. The relationship with the United States: expectations, antagonisms

The previous questions have revealed great scepticism towards Western interference and reluctance to see these countries increase their influence on internal political developments and reform efforts. The Arab Barometer unfortunately does not include questions regarding the expectations towards Europe, however it is still interesting to look at what role is expected of the United States in this region after the Arab Springs.

a. A discrepancy between security demands and economic cooperation

There is a clear difference in expectations of the United States with regards to economic cooperation vs. security. Excluding Libya, only about a third of respondents in the countries considered here favour stronger security relations with the US. Yet, between one-third and half of citizens across the five countries want economic ties to the United States to become stronger.

Interestingly, few citizens in these countries are satisfied with their current level of security relations with the US. At most, just over a third of Yemeni respondents want security relations with the US to remain the same (38%), compared to between 14% and 19% in Tunisia, Libya, Iraq and Egypt.

Pluralities in two countries would prefer security ties to increase: Egypt (34%) and Libya (56%). On the other hand, 44% of Tunisians and 45% of Iraqis would like these ties to...
decrease. Thus, civil unrest does not seem to systematically provoke a desire for American security involvement; rather, public opinion with regards to US security intervention generally reflects the broader openness or scepticism towards foreign influence and the historical nature of the relationship to the US. Egypt and Libya, which face internal unrest and terrorist threats, may indeed seek the military and diplomatic support of the US to fight these groups, while Iraq, which already endured direct US intervention, and Tunisia, which has managed a rather independent transition, would rather see a sovereign solution to their security issues.

On the economic side, Arab publics generally prefer to strengthen economic ties with the US than to weaken them. Only in Iraq does the reverse hold true, but the difference is minimal: 39% is in favour of decreasing vs. 34% in favour of increasing those ties. Elsewhere, larger percentages favour bolstering trade linkages, ranging from 35% to 59% in favour. Overall, an average of two-thirds favour increasing or maintaining economic ties at their current levels.

### 14. Hopes regarding American foreign policy

There is very low desire for ongoing US intervention among the countries investigated here: on average, 56% say that the US should not interfere. This belief is particularly strong in
Libya (55%) and Tunisia (54%), while in Egypt, Iraq and Yemen somewhat fewer held this view, with between 45% and 50% saying the US should not be involved in the region.

Among those who want the US to take a role in the region, most would prefer to see the US promote economic development, or solve the Arab-Israeli conflict (13% respectively).

We can conclude that the majority do not want greater American involvement in the region, reflecting the scepticism that we observed towards greater foreign influence in the previous questions. Those who voiced specific desires for American foreign policy tend to concentrate on the priorities of economic development and the promotion of stability through conflict resolution. “Western priorities,” such as democracy and women’s rights promotion, seem to have little currency among the publics investigated. Only about 9% considered that the US's most positive role was in promoting democracy, with Libyans giving this answer slightly more often (11%). This is not to say that citizens do not want democracy. In fact, most do. But it is clear that few believe it is the US’s job to intervene in the name of democratic development.
c. Remaining antagonisms

Overall, in terms of politics and foreign influence, there is a certain antagonism towards the US. Even when separating out government policies and considering perceptions of America and its people, an interesting trend is visible: except in Yemen, citizens in these countries are less likely to say Americans are “good people” in 2013-4 than in 2011. The average percentage of respondents stating that Americans are “good people despite negative US foreign policy” decreased somewhat between 2011 and 2013-4, falling below 50%.

On the other hand, this growing negative sentiment does not mean that respondents increasingly support armed actions against the US (such as terrorist activities, or state-sponsored direct confrontations). In all countries, the percentage of those saying armed operations against the US are not justified has increased. In 2013-4, about 42% and above considered such actions unjustifiable, even in countries where only one-fourth to one-third disagreed with this statement in 2011 (Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia).

Conclusion

Comparing the second and the third waves of the Arab Barometer has revealed several important trends in the evolution of public opinion towards foreign influences before and after the Arab Spring.

First, most countries have become more and more sceptical not only towards the potential effects of foreign influence on reform paths or democratic developments, but also, in general, about the nature of their underlying intentions – and therefore their desirability. Most Arab publics primarily see foreign influence as an obstacle to reform and do not consider foreign pressures acceptable. Most also think that foreign actors (Western ones, but also neighbouring countries) have not had a positive impact on democratic developments in their country. Only Libya and to a certain extent Yemen still see a positive potential in foreign actors’ actions in their country.

Second, although trust in the benign nature of foreign actors may be lower, hatred and the desire for violent retaliation have considerably diminished since 2011. It may be argued that the more moderate influence of Western actors – whose military involvement in the region became less visible after Libya – have lessened this resentment. The Arab Spring also
refocused these countries’ priorities on internal challenges such as economic growth, stability, and reform rather than fighting foreign interference.

Finally, although all countries mostly wish for increased economic ties with the United States, not all wish for increased security relations, and the general public tends to prefer no interference to a foreign policy promoting democracy, or women’s rights. There is still a small share who would like to see the US be more involved in resolving regional conflicts, including the Arab-Israeli issue or containing Iran, yet over half of the population in our five countries of concern would prefer US withdrawal from the region entirely.
The Arab Barometer is a chapter of Global Barometer Survey. It has its operational base at the Center for Strategic Studies in Jordan (CSS) and involves close collaboration among the Arab Reform Initiative, the University of Michigan, Princeton University, the Palestine Center for Policy and Survey Research and national research centers which lead survey teams in target countries. For the third wave, surveys were conducted in Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen. The full data sets and codebooks for each of the three waves, country reports, related papers and presentations and media links as well as more information are available on the Arab Barometer website. [www.arabbarometer.org](http://www.arabbarometer.org).

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The Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) is a consortium of policy analysis institutes that mobilises research capacity to advance knowledge and nurture home-grown programs for democratic reform in the Arab world. ARI seeks to generate, facilitate, and disseminate knowledge by and for Arab societies. In the quest to build free, just and democratic societies, ARI focuses on the current revolutionary processes in the Arab world, on the new patterns of interaction between political forces, governments and societies, on today’s political, socio-economic and cultural transformations, and on social justice. It opens a space for diverse voices and brings in the key actors in the transformation processes at play: intellectuals, activists, women, civil society representatives, human rights groups, social movements, political parties, the private sector and the media. ARI produces policy research, supports networks of young scholars, convenes policy dialogues and organises regional platforms on critical issues related to the transition processes. [www.arab-reform.net](http://www.arab-reform.net)

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[contact@arab-reform.net](mailto:contact@arab-reform.net)