

# Arab Public Opinion on Political Systems

## A Comparative Study Using Principal Component Analysis<sup>(1)</sup>

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**Abstracts:** The 2019–2020 Arab Opinion Index (AOI) offers interesting data on how responsive Arab societies are toward political regimes. Our study used principal component analysis to evaluate trends in public opinion regarding the suitability of the political regimes of Arab states according to their citizens. The first conclusion is that Arab citizens are generally committed to the priority of democracy despite other priorities related to religious and security concerns. Yet the political elite do not appear to attach great importance to this priority despite the desire for a democratic regime, which explains why Arab countries have experienced a series of failures in the democratic process. The second conclusion is that there are groups of states that are like-minded in their citizens' views on desirable or rejected regimes. Our method allowed us to better understand the underlying elements and components of the similarities and differences between states.

Religion

Politics

Democracy

Principal Component Analysis

## Introduction

Whether consciously or otherwise, democracy has been among the chief demands of the Arab public since the events of the Arab Spring in 2011 in the Middle East and North Africa region. Despite political elites in many states being replaced, the demands of democracy, such as the expansion of participation in political decisions and individual, collective, and religious liberties, have been and continue to be an important requirement for citizens of Arab societies, as indicated by survey data from the 2019–2020 Arab Opinion Index.<sup>(4)</sup>

Based on the same data, we find that a different segment of the Arab public continues to refuse the values and procedures of political modernity such as democracy and the handover of power. This is due to a purely religious or political motive that

prefers autocratic or military rule that presents itself as a regime capable of achieving security, albeit at the expense of liberties. Thus, this impulse tends to "use security as a compromise between stability and prosperity".<sup>(5)</sup> It remains sympathetic in view of the state of affairs in some of the Arab Spring states, where demands for freedom and democracy have been accompanied by chaos for some groups in the society. This can be explained whether out of fear for their interests which had been protected under the political regimes that the Arab Spring held responsible for the deterioration of the human rights situation as well as economic circumstances, or out of apprehension about a democratic transition which could undermine the security those regimes had achieved through a

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<sup>4</sup> *The Arab Opinion Index, 2019/2020*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, accessed on 3/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3MZ7yiY>

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Bahout et al., *Arab Horizons: Pitfalls and Pathways to Renewal* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018), p. 41.

difficult-to-balance equation between the imperatives of human rights and the economy.

This type of tension between the communal and the political arouses uncertainty, embraced by the desire to insert the Western concept of democracy into the Arab intellectual space, at least to the extent necessary to permit it to be adapted, then accepted. The study thereby seeks to understand the political perceptions that are in vogue among Arab societies one decade after the Arab Spring uprisings, especially because they coincide with release of the 2019-2020 AOI data. The importance of the study lies in measuring, from the perspective of citizens, the suitability of a set of political systems currently established in the world to serve as a political regime in Arab states. Based on this evaluation, the study uses statistical tools to determine the principal components by which one may categorise states according to patterns that tend toward certain political regimes.

The problem around which this study revolves lies in understanding the system of governance that current societies deem appropriate, in the wake of the Arab Spring experience as well as subsequent struggles in some Arab countries and abject failure in the rest. In particular, the ambitions of these societies have clashed with an internal, political-economic reality and another regional-international reality blended with a social structure that was not necessarily equipped for the necessities of modernity: namely, political freedom and democracy. The importance

of research based on the views of those directly involved is that they are the ones most concerned with current political circumstances, in comparison with the anticipated changes that the Arab Spring was unsuccessful in establishing. Further, its importance becomes clear through the comparison between a set of Arab states based on principal component analysis to understand the similarities and differences in inclination toward various political regimes. It is in this spirit that we pose several inquiries:

- The first inquiry is, what are the political regimes that Arab societies consider appropriate for their social reality, particularly after the crises some states have witnessed through the inconclusive democratic experiment?
- Next, the second inquiry may be introduced: are there groups that represent varying patterns in terms of political perceptions about some regimes which are favoured or others which are undesirable? What are the similarities between the samples of states in giving preference to some systems of government over others?
- The issue of homogeneity brings up a discussion within Arab societies, whence the third inquiry is posed: what are the components, or elements, through which one may understand the similarities and differences between groups that belong to the same Islamic space on the issue of the optimal system of government from the citizens' perspective?

## Methodology and Typological Analysis

The latest 2019–2020 AOI survey data, published by the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, are employed and composed of a sample of 27,994 respondents from thirteen states (i.e., Jordan, Tunisia, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Iraq, Mauritania, Palestine, Kuwait, Lebanon, Egypt, Morocco, and Qatar). These states were selected according to available data in the survey. At an initial stage, the data was revised, the variables were validated, and certain items were corrected and recoded for usability. Between the survey's many questions, a limited number of variables were derived in relation

to a question about six extant political regimes (as we shall see in the results) and finding out "the extent to which these systems are suitable", through respondents' answers, "to be a political regime in their country". Responses were on a scale of 1 to 4, where the proposed political regime may be evaluated from "very unsuitable" to "very suitable". The tables of percentages and averages, as we shall see in the presentation of descriptive results, enable us to identify the Arab societies that are most inclined toward given political regimes and, thus, to answer and discuss the first inquiry of the study.

Following descriptive analysis of the data, the study uses principal component analysis,<sup>(6)</sup> taken as a technique that helps to outline and summarise data. Beginning with six questions on political regimes (i.e., variables), the results of this analysis shall show us how interrelated some of the regimes are according to the responses of citizens. Thereafter, these interlinked (albeit partially) variables may be transformed into a smaller set of "imagined independent variables" regarded as principal components. They will be calculated using statistical methods based on the original variables with proportions and amounts greater or lesser according to the role and effect of each variable.<sup>(7)</sup> Using this statistical model, states may be categorised and compared according to principal components (as we shall see by way of a chart in the results section), and one may identify the extent to which some sets of states are or are not homogeneous in terms of addressing the system of governance question. Thereby, we may respond to and discuss the second inquiry of the study.

Moreover, using principal component analysis helps answer the third inquiry given that each principal component represents the elements by which to understand the similarities and differences between groups, as well as to determine the Arab societies that belong to the same Islamic intellectual space or the very societies that, according to their citizens, are inclined toward other political regimes. In addition to principal component analysis, the cluster analysis method<sup>(8)</sup> has been employed to delve deeper into understanding and defining groups based on their characteristics in relation to the (six) original variables, as we shall see during the results.

The analytical procedures we have selected are regarded as a component of typological methods, seeking to shed light on groups marked by shared characteristics and which differ from other groups. The study defines groups according to the extent to which Arab citizens see their countries' political regimes as suitable, seeking to bring forth the

ideal types of these regimes. By way of principal components, we may define the general modes of classifying states. This kind of analysis necessitates some observations to interpreting the results. The ideal types are simply a theoretical construction, and they cannot take the place of the empirical reality that every citizen seeks to articulate in responding to the survey's questions. Therefore, we must be careful not to perceive the very image of empirical reality in ideal types. The primary function of this statistical approach is to present a means to sketch a focused image that brings us closer to this reality without being inclusive of all aspects surrounding the daily life of the individuals that make up society.

We must realise that the countries under study represent interwoven cases in terms of social structure their cultural, political, and economic matrix, despite particularities resulting from the course of history and institutions. Both citizens' inclination toward a political regime and their association with a given classification may be of use in shedding light on the perceptions and choices shared by some states. It is within this framework that the similarity between trees and forests arises, which thoroughly outlines the analytical perspective put forth by the typological approach: faced with the massive, uncountable number of individual trees, it becomes necessary to formulate a way of thinking about the forest and its principal components on the basis of some ideal types of trees, even if this way of thinking reveals only part of reality.<sup>(9)</sup> We may typically find the roots of typological analysis in the theoretical perspective of the German scholar Max Weber (1864–1920) on the concept of the ideal type. Weber holds that this model assists in posing assumptions and searching for the subjective meanings of phenomena which, even if these meanings may not express specific manifestations of reality, suggest some paradigmatic features based on a logical construction of the concepts which frame the phenomenon under study. Weber's ideal types may be considered a means that allow for a progression of knowledge through the

6 I.T. Jolliffe, *Principal Component Analysis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Springer, 2002), p. 1.

7 Ganesh R. Naik (ed.), *Advances in Principal Component Analysis: Research and Development* (New York: Springer, 2018), p. 59.

8 Christian Hennig et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Cluster Analysis* (London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group, LLC, 2016), pp. 104-107.

9 W.I.L. Arts & John Gelissen, "Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism or More? A State-of-the-Art Report," *Journal of European Social Policy*, vol. 12, no. 2 (2002), p. 139.

constant reorganisation of scientific concepts.<sup>(10)</sup> In this context, many contemporary intellectuals have connected ideal models and typological analysis to the comprehensive approach; this we can see through Dominique Schnapper's book<sup>(11)</sup> focused on the comprehensive dimension in relation to

mode analysis. Some of the book's chapters discuss the analysis and sorting of social and political systems (as ideal models of the welfare states in the Western countries)<sup>(12)</sup> into patterns for understanding difference, similarity, and the causes thereof.

## Political Regimes and Conflict of Ideologies in the Arab World

The conflicts the Arab world has witnessed for more than half a century have undoubtedly not been devoid of piety-driven movements. That compels us to take the place of religion within the political and social culture of the region into account, and it is possible to use the definition of religion offered by Sadiq Jalal al-Azm — one that remains significant within this framework. The late Syrian intellectual defines religion in the region as

*a tremendous power that penetrates the core of our lives, that influences our essential mental and psychological structures, that determines our way of thinking about and reacting to the world in which we live, and that forms an integral part of the behaviours and habits with which we grew up.*<sup>(13)</sup>

This articulation indicates that societies of the region are still structured by religious discourse, which can convey its perspective to the political arena, despite the presence of other forces — nationalism, leftism, liberalism — that see a political dimension in secularism and have been unable to formulate a compelling political discourse with a secular, or at least democratic, foundation.

Yet the liberal movement, for instance, has often been regarded as an individual, or at best party-level struggle, not as a practical experiment based on a theoretical debate. It therefore may be said that

Arab liberal discourse is still confined to Western theoretical frameworks and standards, as well as to their inability to benefit Arab society.<sup>(14)</sup> As a result, this movement began to seem in want of roots within its Arab-Islamic intellectual space. Since the events of the Arab Spring, current liberal discourse has become muddled due to its deep relation to certain templates within their Western spheres, yet they do not benefit present Arab culture. Moreover, this discourse has remained confined to events underway that pay it no mind; Arab liberals were unable to convince the public that liberalism is the way out of the crises. In fact, many have not been able to rid themselves of relationships and entanglements with the regimes that the masses came out against during the Arab Spring. To this we add that, within the Arab imaginary in general, connection is automatically made between the liberal West on one hand, regarded as the main point of reference for Arab liberal discourse, and the colonial West, loyal to Israel and therefore seen as an enemy to the interests of the Arab public, on the other;<sup>(15)</sup> this dichotomy heightens the difficulty faced by the liberal movement in the reception of its ideology among Arab populations, not to mention that the experience of some parties under this movement's influence have been ill-fated in many Arab countries.<sup>(16)</sup> These parties saw no moral obstacle to allying with other parties with inclinations contrary to liberal assertions. Further, the rushing and scrambling within the political-economic sphere has driven this

10 Laurent Fleury, *Max Weber*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009), p. 25.

11 Dominique Schnapper, *La compréhension sociologique: démarche de l'analyse typologique* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012), p. 63.

12 Axel Van den Berg, "Quebec's Distinct Welfare State," *Inroads: The Canadian Journal of Opinion*, no. 31 (Summer/Fall 2012), p. 61.

13 Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, *Naqd al-Fikr al-Dīnī* (Beirut: Dar al-Talī'ia, 1997), p. 12.

14 Abdallah Laroui, *al-Aydyulūjīyya al-'Arabīyya al-Mu'āšira (Šiyāgha jadīda)* (Casablanca: Centre Culturel Arabe, 1995), pp. 44-48.

15 Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, "Musāhama ft-l-Naqd al-Aydyulūjī," in: Bassam El Kurdy et al. (eds.), *Muḥāwarāt Fikr 'Abdullāh al-'Urwī* (Casablanca: Centre Culturel Arabe, 2000), p. 99.

16 See, for instance, in relation to the Tunisian experience: Samir Mohammed Hamdi, "al-Aḥzāb al-Librāliyya fī Tūnis: Shi'ārāt Jawfā' 'alā Warāq Fākhīr," *Albayan*, no. 324 (June 2014), accessed on 4/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/2WYif0d>; on the Egyptian experience, see: Saad Mehio, "al-Rabī' al-'Arabī Lam Yamut, bal Yatamakhkhad!" *Swissinfo*, 5/6/2014, accessed on 4/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3h2zuV5>

movement away from the primary problem of social justice in Arab countries.

As for the nationalist-leftist movement, suffice it to recall that its present failure to win over the Arab public goes back to the reverberations left behind by the difficulties this movement encountered when it took power in the 1950s and 1960s in a set of Arab states. Compounding that, the concept of the state in socialist-nationalist thought had been marginalised and insufficiently theorised on behalf of the concept of "the Arab nation" which had the lion's share of prominence within nationalist ideology.<sup>(17)</sup> On the other hand, pan-Arabism transformed during the 20th century from the idea of belonging or a moveable notion of identity into an ideological doctrine of authority rooted in political aspirations. Within the framework of this issue, Burhan Ghalioun notes that "since the 1930s, pan-Arabism became a dominant, popular political notion in Syria and Iraq. With the demographic growth of the urban population, the spread of education, the development of the press, and the appearance of an enthusiastic political elite, the message of Arab nationalism had penetrated all generations. It has dominated political discourse and compelled all other loyalties/identities to keep quiet".<sup>(18)</sup> In this way, a popular national movement was born, then it transformed into an authoritarian force in Iraq and Syria: these regimes reject all forms of organised opposition and tend to restrict all activities of society to guarantee "national security" as they see it. This caused it to lose its prestige and popularity in Arab countries. In terms of theory, this discourse remained elitist despite its talk of the masses and social justice.

To reinforce this proposition, we may invoke the experience of Iran in 1979. During the Iranian revolution against Mohammed Reza Shah, Michel Foucault visited Iran as a correspondent for the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera*. When he

reached the cities of Tehran and Qom, Foucault would ask Iranians in the streets what system of governance they desired: four out of five Iranians interviewed responded "an Islamic government".<sup>(19)</sup> At the time, the French philosopher did not have the precise means to gauge the political will of Iranians. Yet the general situation as Foucault explained it in his essays gave the impression of this popular inclination, although it was impossible to conduct a popular referendum through elections which are fair, or at least permitted, in the way we have at our disposal today. This desire to invoke the religious element of political praxis shall become clear in the Arab region. Following the events of the Arab Spring and the ascent of the Islamist current on the political landscape of many Arab countries, initial victories for the Islamist parties came in one after the other — the Tunisian Ennahda Movement, the Egyptian Freedom and Justice Party, and the Moroccan Justice and Development Party — and bore witness to the public sympathy with the presence of a discourse imbued with religious connotations in the political arena.<sup>(20)</sup> Generally, even before the events of the Arab Spring, the Arab experience had demonstrated a large turnout in elections for Islamist parties that brought many of them into power or participation therein.<sup>(21)</sup>

Faced with the conflict of ideologies in the Arab sphere, between those that reject democracy and those that accept it as well as take advantage of its mechanisms, the AOI survey offers us the possibility of gauging the views of the Arab masses in their less-than-democratic choices as well. Thereby, we may set out from those figures to analyse the choices that remain justifiable and comprehensible when considering the historical and political context of the countries seeing growing demand for undemocratic regimes.

17 For details on this issue, see: Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, *al-Khiṭāb al-'Arabī al-Mu'āṣir: Dirāsa Taḥlīliyya Naqdiyya* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1994), pp. 107-189.

18 Burhan Ghalioun, "L'arabisme par-delà nationalisme et islamisme," *Confluences Méditerranée*, vol. 2, no. 61 (2007), p. 105.

19 Lawrence Olivier & Sylvain Labbe, "Foucault et l'Iran: à propos du désir de révolution," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 24, no. 2 (June 1991), p. 222.

20 For example, during the 1991 Algerian legislative elections, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) received 188 seats out of 231 – nearly 82%. In Egypt, the "Muslim Brotherhood" came together as the first opposition force and obtained 88 seats in the 2005 legislative elections. Further, the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) was victorious in the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. Not far from the Arab region, Islamists from the Justice and Development Party triumphed during the 2007 Turkish elections.

21 We would mention, for instance, the Moroccan Justice and Development Party, which took part in governance alongside the monarchical establishment after their victory in the 2011 and 2016 legislative election cycles. They lost in the most recent elections on 9/9/2021, clearing the way for the liberal movement's client parties.

## The Desire for Democracy Among Nations and their Political Elites in the Arab World

Faced with democratic aspirations, there is still a kind of academic discourse that reduces the Arab and broader Islamic world, in a word, to Islam that is considered the religion of "the different Other".<sup>(22)</sup> Many widespread differences among the people of the Arab region are, hence, skipped over in accordance with historical, political, economic, and social experiences. The views of the Arab public themselves are thenceforth ignored such that their very demands, in many Western discourses, no longer change with time.<sup>(23)</sup>

In fact, the great difficulty lies in discourses such as these, including scientific discourse itself, given that they remain trapped within what Mohammed Arkoun calls "classical Islamology" [*l'islamologie classique*]. This "descriptive" approach is perceived to forfeit the critical analysis of forms of discourse and voices present in the Islamic space, projecting Islam's past onto the Arab-Islamic world's present. Islam and, therefore, its space can only be found in books of ancient heritage, not in people's lived experiences.<sup>(24)</sup>

From the perspective of classical Islam, the Islamic world (in addition to Muslims in the West) is reduced into a single Islamic state without regard for the differences among states in the region nor for their degrees of affiliation with political modernity. Classical Islamology tends to erase borders and, consequently, to shrink the spectrum of analysis; Tunis, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Afghanistan, for instance, are placed in the same political network despite the great variation between these countries in how they deal with religion and politics.

Contrary to classical Islamology, Arkoun proposes "applied Islamology" [*l'islamologie appliquée*] which

necessarily subjects Islam and the types of Islamic discourse to the interdisciplinary requirements of the humanities and social sciences. To regain perspectives that are neglected in classical Islamology, Arkoun seeks for this approach to be open to all expressions of Islamic thought; hence, one must take interest in a variety of fields such as oral expression in Islamic societies, the unwritten oral experience, the unwritten-unauthorised experience, and so forth.<sup>(25)</sup> Arkoun's objective remains "to read the past and present of Islam starting from the present expressions and demands of Islamic societies".<sup>(26)</sup>

Politically, this view of the Arab world has found its objective in the faltering of the democratic process in the region since the independence years. The Arab Spring revolution is considered a major turning point, with democracy having largely constituted one of the Arab public's most important demands as it remains to this day. Before long, the failure to establish the pillars of democracy is attributed to Islam, which is presented as a religion that curtails the consolidation of democracy's foundations. For instance, the French scholar Jamal Bouoiyour argues that in addition to economic instability, the primary obstacle to democracy in the Arab nation is religious belief.<sup>(27)</sup> Naturally, many problems afflict this argument, such as the fact that there are other regions in which democracy has been established, without their inhabitants having given up their religious beliefs, in the very same Western Christendom. When considering Islam by itself apart from other religions, Turkey has managed, with its Islamic frame of reference, to establish a Western-style democracy. Even Muslim populations in the

22 Maxime Rodinson, *La fascination de l'Islam* (Paris: Maspero, 1982), p. 19.

23 For a breakdown of types of these discourses and the challenge of producing a scientific discourse on Islam and the Muslim world, see: Jean-Robert Henry & Franck Frégosi, "Variations françaises sur l'Islam éternel: pour une typologie des discours", in: Bruno Étienne (ed.), *La France et l'Islam* (Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1990).

24 Mohammed Arkoun, *Pour une critique de la raison islamique* (Paris: Mouton-Roulet, 1984), pp. 43-45. Olivier Roy holds the same notion, see, for instance: Atmane Tazaghart, "Ulfiyyih Ruwā: lā šila li-Istishraqīnā bi-Istishraq al-Istikhbarāt al-Anklūsaksūnī!", *Al-Akhbar*, 10/12/2007, accessed on 4/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3D2Jh6W>

25 Arkoun, *Pour une critique de la raison islamique*, pp. 44-48.

26 Mohammed Arkoun, *Ouvertures sur l'Islam* (Paris: Éditions Grancher, 1989), p. 8.

27 Jamal Bouoiyour, "Les pays arabes et la démocratie: une équation impossible?", *Le Point*, 19/8/2021, accessed on 4/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3kgAp5a>

West have embraced democratic regimes and, in fact, take part in their consecration through various institutions and organisations.

It is certain, however, that the profusion of desire among Arab societies for democracy via the creation of parliaments and constituents does not mean that its pillars have been secured,<sup>(28)</sup> or even that its culture has spread among some segments of the population. Rather, democracy in many of these societies comes as a solution when previous political experiments fail. It appears that the answer to the inquiry on accountability for the faltering of democracy in the Arab region may be found in Azmi Bishara's argument on democratic transition.<sup>(29)</sup> He hands political elites the responsibility for initiating the process of democratic transition by ensuring the spread of democratic principles in the political culture of society, as "the government's policies and laws and the conditions they create have a radical effect upon political culture".<sup>(30)</sup>

Thus, it was those elites convinced of the principles of democracy who were responsible for the success of the process. This conviction must appear in praxis within the culture of these elites by way of two elements Bishara considers significant: "a) to accept the principle of citizenship and the political rights, civil liberties, and duties that follow therefrom; and b) to adhere to democratic institutions and procedures".<sup>(31)</sup> According to this proposal, there is no point waiting for the values of democracy to spread among segments

of the people; rather, it is the responsibility of elites who must accept the democratic game and adhere to its values in practise even at the cost of losing elite privileges, should the winds of political change within a democratic framework so permit. The praxis of these elites is supposed to anchor the values of democracy little by little among segments of society: perhaps this is what explains the consecutive failures of the Arab Spring states that came to know a post-2011 form of democratic practise, despite its popularity among wide sections of those states' populations.

The failure of the democratic process in Egypt may be explained by a significant component of the political elites having formed a coalition with the army, whose role was now direct and of the utmost significance in politics after having been minimal in the last years before the 25 January 2011 revolution.<sup>(32)</sup> Instead of waiting for the tenure of the democratically-elected president to end on 30 June 2012 to call him and his party to account through the ballot box were it to become clear that his policies had failed, a large segment of the political elite preferred not to wait and resorted to the streets, running roughshod of one of the most important principles of democracy: adherence to democratic institutions and procedures, in Bishara's idiom. By the logic of democracy, this adherence would ensure the resolution of political and ideological conflicts; even if the ruling party were to harbour autocratic intentions, the dissident political elite would be able to challenge them as law and institution dictate.<sup>(33)</sup>

## Results

The 2019 - 2020 AOI consists of a set of questions through which one may study the extent to which the Arab states' political regimes are suitable from their citizens' point of view. Questions were posed

about six of the most prominent political regimes to be found in the world, and the preliminary results (see Table 1) may be summarised as follows:

28 Samir Hamdi, "Hal hiya dīmuqrāṭiyya bilā dīmuqrāṭiyyīn?," *Alaraby Aljadeed*, 30/1/2018, accessed on 4/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3ts9rMd>

29 See: Azmi Bishara, *al-Intiqāl al-Dīmuqrāṭī wa-Ishkāliyyātuh: Dirāsa Nazariyya wa Taṭbīqiyya Muqārana* (Doha and Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2020).

30 Ibid., p. 416.

31 Ibid., p. 419.

32 On this subject, see: Azmi Bishara, *al-Jaysh wa-l-Siyāsa: Ishkāliyyāt Nazariyya wa-Namādhij 'Arabīyya* (Doha and Beirut: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2017), pp. 183-198.

33 Of this James Madison (1751–1836) was aware in the tenth essay of his famous *Federalist Papers*. See: Alexander Hamilton et al., *The Federalist Papers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 54-55.

There is a very large proportion of respondents (from all Arab states) who believe that the competition-based political regime is suitable as far as their country is concerned. This segment articulates its inclination toward democratic regimes, holding that all parties therein, regardless of their platforms and tendencies, must compete through parliamentary elections. This regime had the highest average rating compared to the others, at 3.21 out of 4. More than 80 per cent of responses were "very suitable" or "somewhat suitable". The regime where the military are in control came in second, with 38.5 per cent of respondents believing that this regime is very suitable or somewhat suitable; this regime obtained an average of 2.18 out of 4.

Two regimes — "the regime governed by Islamic Shari'a law without elections" and "the regime in which only Islamic parties compete" — are tied for third place with very close percentages and similar degrees. Nearly 34 per cent of respondents believe that these regimes are very suitable or somewhat suitable for their states. The two earned averages of 2.10 and 2.07 out of 4 respectively. Ultimately, there are only about 20 per cent of respondents who believe that both "the political regime ruled by an authority which takes decisions without regard for the results of elections (i.e., an autocratic regime)" and "the political regime in which non-religious parties compete in parliamentary elections" are very suitable or somewhat suitable for the country. These two regimes received very low averages, with 1.78 out of 4 for both.

On the classification of states by political regime, as respondents see it, the charts in Figure 1 include the percentages of those regarding these regimes as very suitable or somewhat suitable. On the competition-based regime, results show that the bulk of states (most of all Algeria and Egypt) have elevated percentages. It ought to be indicated that two exceptions, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, both recorded less than 50 per cent of respondents that consider this regime very suitable or somewhat suitable.

On the Islamic regime (i.e., a regime in which only Islamist parties compete in parliamentary elections), the results indicate that there are some states such

as Mauritania, Kuwait, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia leading the rankings with middling percentages (ranging from 40–56%). The smallest proportion was found in Lebanon (9.4%): most Lebanese respondents, in other words, do not believe that Islamist parties are suitable for their country.

Moreover, the results demonstrate tangible progress for Saudi Arabia compared to its counterparts, recording the highest percentage (43.8%) of respondents who believe that the autocratic regime (ruled by an authority that takes decisions without regard for the results of elections) is very suitable or somewhat suitable. On the Islamic law regime, the results indicate significant headway for Saudi Arabia, recording a very high percentage (79.3%) of respondents who believe that this regime is very suitable or somewhat suitable. Further, we observe a proportion greater than 50% in other states such as Jordan, Mauritania, and Qatar in terms of inclination toward the Islamic law regime.

Lebanon takes the highest rank as to a non-religious regime, recording 43.7% of respondents who believe that this regime is very suitable or somewhat suitable for their country. On the military regime (i.e., a political regime governed by the military or by army leadership), the data demonstrates the advancement of states such as Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia, and Lebanon with percentages greater than 50% of respondents who believe that this regime is very suitable or somewhat suitable for their country.

Figure 2 displays the principal components around which the Arab states are distributed. As a reminder, these components were obtained statistically,<sup>(34)</sup> based on the original variables related to the six regimes' suitability for respondents' countries. The first principal component (i.e., the horizontal axis) illustrates the religious orientation (i.e., the Islamic regime + Islamic Shari'a) as we go left, and the non-religious orientation (i.e., the same military trend) as we go right. The second principal component (i.e., the vertical axis) illustrates the competition-based multiparty regime heading downward, and the autocratic orientation heading upward.



**Table 1**  
**Percentages and Averages of Political Regimes by Respondents' Evaluation of their Suitability for their States**

Sample inclination	Relative importance index	Std. deviation	Average (1–4)	Somewhat unsuitable or absolutely unsuitable		Very suitable or somewhat suitable		I will mention some political regimes that currently exist in the world, and I would like to know to what extent they are suitable to be a political system in your country.
				%	N	%	N	
High	80.3	0.95	3.21	18.9	4,865	81.1	20,894	A political system in which governments are formed based on the outcomes of elections in which all political parties are free to join.
Intermediate	54.5	1.12	2.18	61.5	15,768	38.5	9,864	A political system governed by the military or by army leadership.
Intermediate	52.5	1.06	2.10	65.9	16,849	34.1	8,724	A political system governed by Islamic Sharia, and in which there are neither elections nor political parties.
Intermediate	51.8	1.00	2.07	65.8	16,681	34.2	8,674	A political system in which electoral competition is restricted to Islamist political parties.
Low	44.5	0.89	1.78	80.2	20,383	19.8	5,033	A political system in which the state authority makes the decisions without taking into account the results of the elections or the opinions of the opposition.
Low	44.5	0.92	1.78	78.3	19,968	21.6	5,496	A political system in which electoral competition is restricted to non-religious parties.

Source: AOI 2019–2020, after researchers extracted and calculated the percentages using SPSS.

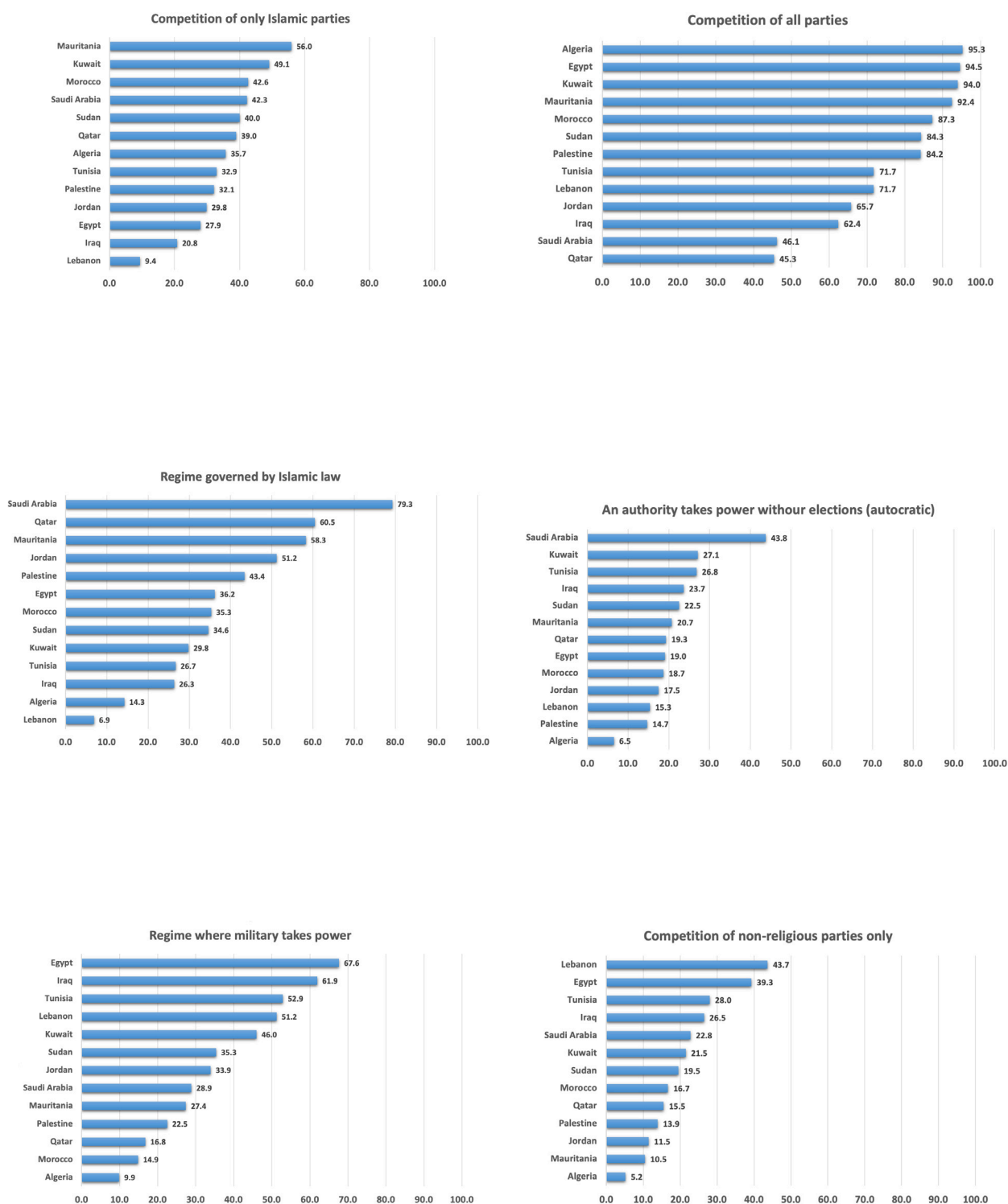
The importance of this typological research method is evident when researching variables that could create divergences between states. Thus, it becomes clear through Figure 2 that the religious factor plays an important role in determining the inclination of Arab societies in comparison with other factors. Per the results, states may be classified into three groups:

- The **first group**, the most harmonious, includes four states: **Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, and Tunisia**. This group has been influenced by the first principal component; respondents from these states express the extent to which they align with the non-religious or military regime compared to the rest of the states. Although most respondents

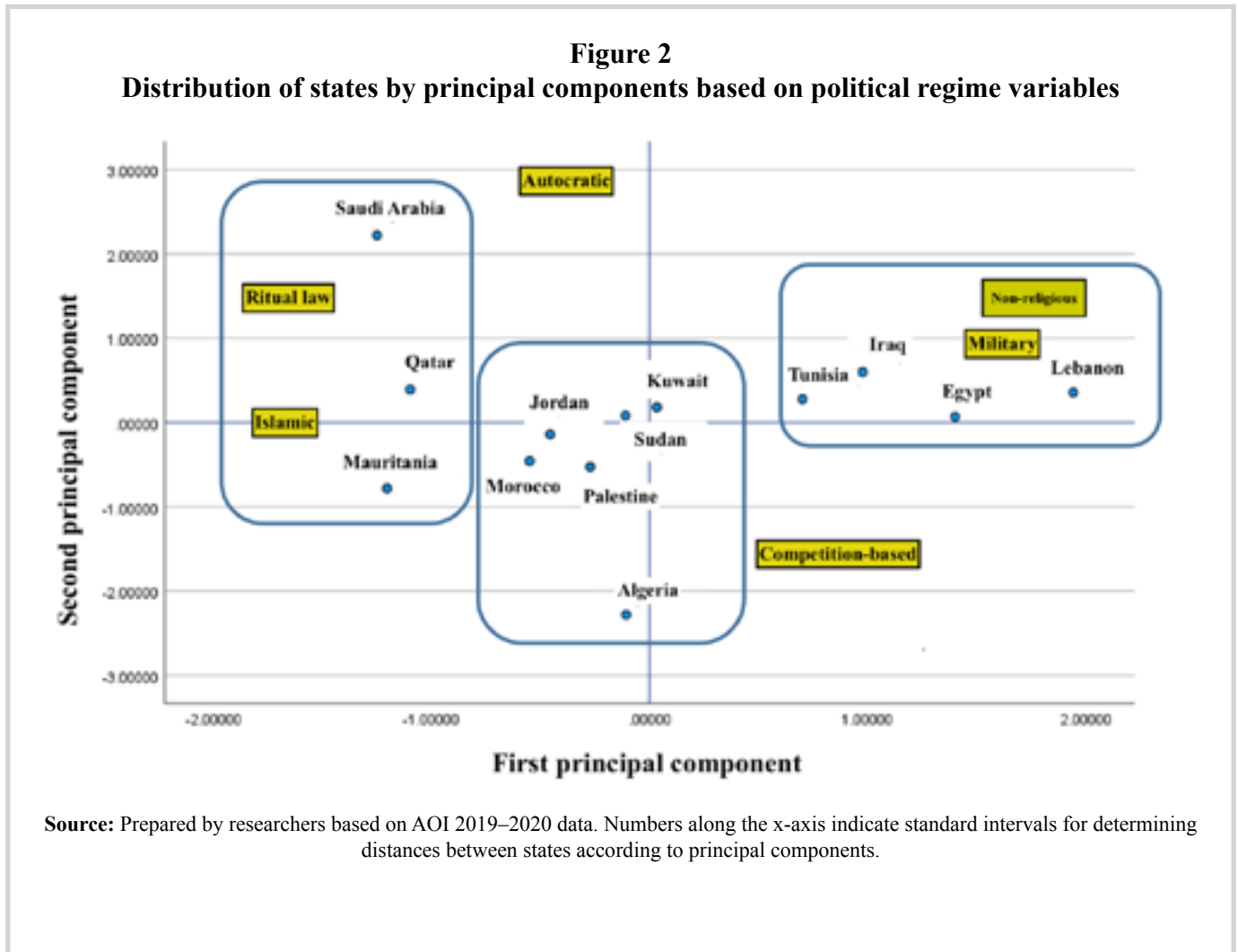
are inclined toward the competition-based regime (based on the above results), this group displays a mild tendency toward the autocratic regime compared to the remaining states (given their presence in the highest quadrant in Figure 2).

- The **second group** includes **Kuwait, Jordan, Sudan, Morocco, Palestine, and Algeria**. This group falls in the middle especially in terms of the first component, despite a mild inclination toward the Islamic regime as far as Jordan, Morocco, and Palestine are concerned. The second principal component had a great impact on respondents from Algerian society; they have distanced themselves from the autocratic regime and endorsed the competition-based political

**Figure 1**  
**Ranking of states by % of citizens who believe that given political regimes befit their country**



Source: AOI 2019–2020, after researchers extracted and calculated the percentages using SPSS.



system. Further, we observe an inclination toward the competition-based regime over the autocratic regime in Palestine and Morocco (given their presence in the lowest quadrant of Figure 2).

- The **third group** includes **Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Mauritania**. A notable trend for this group appears before us to the left of the first principal component: respondents articulated their support for the Islamic regime (i.e., the regime of Islamist parties) and the Islamic Shari‘a regime. We note that this group is less harmonious on the level of the second principal component, with Saudi Arabia having become largely characterised by inclination toward the autocratic regime, though an inclination toward the competition-based regime is observed in Mauritania.

In addition to principal component analysis, the cluster analysis method has been used to delve into understanding and defining the groups by their characteristics in relation to the original variables

(i.e., six variables detached from the principal components). Figure 3 represents the classification method (according to Euclidean distances) so that the further we get from the top of the cluster (from right to left), the more precisely groups begin to settle at the top of the clusters in terms of degree of compatibility among respondents on the suitability of these systems for becoming a political regime in their country.

From the red line represented by the value of 5 within the cluster sequence, three main groups may be delineated:

- The **first group**, the most harmonious, includes four states: **Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, and Tunisia** (corresponding with the first typology based on principal components in Figure 2). All these states have low average suitability for the Islamic regime and low average suitability for the Islamic Shari‘a regime. They had the highest averages in terms of support for non-religious parties; perhaps

this element was what determined this group's harmony, as principal components analysis shows as well.

- The **second group** includes **Qatar and Jordan**. Though the first typology according to principal components analysis did not identify the same group, there has been a rapprochement between the two states in terms of inclination toward the Islamic regime and Islamic Shari'a. **Saudi Arabia** appears outside this group, given its particularity in having received a very high average suitability for the autocratic regime. Yet this group remains the most closely congruent with Saudi Arabia in terms of inclination toward the Islamic regime and Shari'a. The three states may be integrated into the same group when we approach the value of 10 on the cluster hierarchy.
- The **third group** includes **Kuwait, Morocco, Mauritania, and Palestine**. This group is distinguished by middling averages in general (intermediate regimes) with a mild inclination toward the competition-based regime, then the Islamic regime to some extent. **Algeria** appears outside this group, given its particularity in having received a very low average suitability for the autocratic regime (in the sense that there is a near-total rejection of this regime among respondents). Yet this group remains the most closely congruent with Algeria in terms of inclination toward the competition-based regime being suitable — despite a very high level for Algeria along this axis. Algeria may be integrated into this same group when we approach the value of 10 on the cluster hierarchy.

## Discussion and Summary

The 2019–2020 AOI offers rich data which may shed light on various political and social issues. The analytical method used in this study help us to understand the best option for citizens among a group of available political regimes. The results give us a glimpse at the common denominators and the dissimilarities among Arab societies in terms of the political regimes citizens consider suitable for their countries — particularly in the wake of the unsatisfactory experience of the Arab Spring revolutions. These results lead us to discuss the orientations underlying the typology of states based on the three questions that were formulated at the beginning.

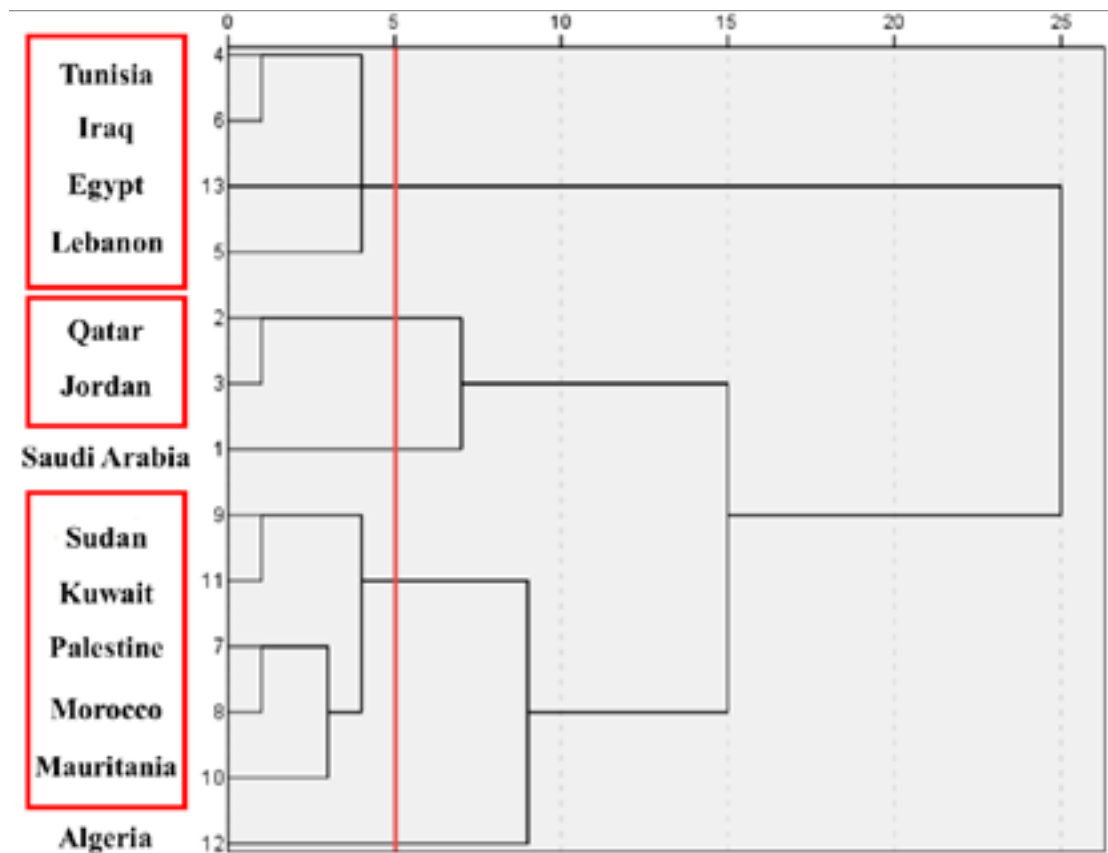
- The objective of the first question is to become acquainted with the political regimes that Arab societies consider appropriate for their social reality, particularly after the crises related to the inconclusive democratic experiment. The results indicate that a class of citizens have perceptions which are far-fetched or incompatible with modern democratic choices. These perceptions appear in the options that are distributed between preference for military rule, the regime governed by Islamic law without elections, or the regime

in which only Islamist parties compete. That indicates the exclusion of secular parties or those which do not invoke religious authority in their platforms. The regime in which all parties compete remains the desire of the great majority within a group of states (at least out of those under study of the AOI survey). In these states, more than 80% of respondents desire a competition-based political regime; there is, in other words, a desire for regimes in which all parties, regardless of their platforms, compete through parliamentary elections.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia leads the states that reject the principle of democracy by calling for an autocratic regime or a regime governed by Islamic Shari'a. This choice remains connected to the dominant political culture in this country, which derives its lexicon from classical Islamic political thought by way of the pre-eminence of the Qur'an, the Sunnah of the Prophet, Islamic Shari'a, as well as concepts such as *al-Shūrā* (consultation), *ṭā'at walī-l-amr* (obedience towards the leadership), and so on.<sup>(35)</sup> These concepts run contrary to the principles of modern democracy yet appear cogent to the vast majority in Saudi Arabia. But when we turn to the

35 See: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Bureau of Experts of the Council of Ministers, *al-Nizām al-Asāsī lil-Ḥukm al-Šādīr bil-Amr al-Malakī raqm A-90 bi-Tārīkh 27/08/1412 A.H. al-Muwāfiq li-01/03/1992 A.D.* (Riyadh: 6/3/1992), accessed on 4/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/314DGFb>

**Figure 3**  
**Formation of groups of different states by suitability of given political regimes based on cluster typology**



Source: Ibid

Arab states in which the majority generally demand competition and democracy, we see that they have all experienced parliamentary elections. This experience remains the ideal political solution in the eyes of the majority despite its faltering, or at least its inability to reach the desired level of credibility.<sup>(36)</sup> Despite this burning desire for party competition, there are different types of state, some of which tend toward political regimes far from the religious orientation — that becomes clear through discussion of the second question.

- The second question revolves around the potential for there to be groups of states that constitute

models that vary in terms of political perceptions of regimes, some favourable and others undesirable. In this context, the results demonstrate the formulation of at least three homogeneous groups, each with some resemblance and a degree of contrast in terms of citizens' attitudes regarding some political regimes.

Still noteworthy are the results for the group made up of Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and Tunisia; these countries (and Egypt in particular) call for competition-based regimes in which all parties participate. They also take the lead in terms of demand for a military or non-religious regime: that seems clear from the distribution of states in Figure 2 as well

<sup>36</sup> The credibility of democratic elections is achieved when the latter are characterised by universality, transparency, accountability, and competition, as we corroborate via: Patrick Merloe, *Promoting Legal Frameworks for Democratic Elections* (Washington, D.C.: National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, 2008), pp. 1-9.

as the typology of groups in Figure 3. This may be understood by way of the modern history of Egypt in which the army has performed an important role in politics since the 1952 Free Officers revolution; by contrast, the experience of elections after the 25 January 2011 revolution has continued to witness an irrefutable desire for democratic governance in which all ideologies compete without exclusion. The political-sectarian experiment Lebanon has undertaken, at least since the end of the civil war (1975–1989), remains highly influential on the Lebanese public's political choices. Because this country rejects the meshing of religion and politics, it is clearly part of the group (taking first place) that repudiates the entrance of religious parties into the race of electoral competition; this has become clear during the latest crisis (2020–2021) where among the rallying cries of protesters was their rejection of religious sectarianism that exploits religion to gain political privileges.<sup>(37)</sup> It is worth returning to the experience of Iraq after the 2003 American invasion, where "civic activism faced new trials, including a political environment characterised by vicious civil conflicts that took on a sectarian hue".<sup>(38)</sup> Sectarian tensions, not to mention the experience of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (a.k.a. Daesh) organisation, made it impossible to narrow the gap between positions amidst demands for the return to autocratic rule or to exclude the Other and seek refuge in one's sect, amidst regional and international contention over Iraq that could precipitate "yet another round of civil war".<sup>(39)</sup> The Tunisian public's discontent with the vacillation of the democratic process may be explained by respondents' inclination toward

undemocratic regimes to guarantee, minimally, the same pre-revolution economic standard.<sup>(40)</sup>

Further, the results demonstrate that there is a group composed of moderate states of which some are inclined toward party competition but do not desire military or autocratic regimes, along with a mild tendency toward the religious orientation among others. Here we make special mention of the monarchical regimes which permit an electoral system, such as Jordan and Morocco (as well as the Kuwaiti emirate regime). In these two kingdoms, the institution of the king is sovereign, and it governs by historical and religious legitimacy which is accepted by both respective populations and a regime which is conservative yet somewhat amenable to democratic institutions (i.e., government and parliament). These derive their legitimacy from elections — without jeopardising the prerogatives of the ruling monarchical institution.<sup>(41)</sup> Inside this group, we find that Algeria comes in first among states calling for a regime in which all parties compete and comes at the end of the list of states calling for a military-led or autocratic regime. Algerians remain in near-total harmony in their rejection of an undemocratic system that would either abrogate party plurality or rule by Islamic Shari'a. This we may glean from those events Algeria saw after the army abrogated the 1992 elections which the FIS had won democratically — sending the country into a spiral of insurgency and counterinsurgency for almost ten years — and the prominent role they played in solidifying the near-universal trend among Algerians toward the democratic option. The choices of the Algerian public have been emphasised by way of the slogans raised amidst popular unrest since 2019, as, too, has the

37 Renaud Girard, "Ces jeunes qui préparent le Liban de demain," *Le Figaro*, 7/6/2021, accessed on 4/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/2VjIcGU>; "Ālāf al-Lubnāniyyīn Yatazāharūn Ihtijājān 'alā al-Azma al-Iqtisādiyya wa-Farq Rusūm Jadīda," *France24*, 18/10/2019, accessed on 4/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/38Wv7Xn>

38 Maha Yahya, *The Summer of our Discontent: Citizens and Sects in Iraq and Lebanon* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2017), p. 19.

39 Farhad Alaaldin & Kenneth M. Pollack, "Iraq's Economic Collapse Could Be Biden's First Foreign Policy Headache," *Foreign Policy*, 14/12/2020, accessed on 4/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3jPyDsD>

40 Hicham Raïq & Mohamed Ourya, "Madā Riḍā al-Shabāb fī Zīll al-Taḥawwulāt al-Siyāsiyya wa-l-Iqtisādiyya ba'd al-Rabī' al-'Arabī: Taḥlīl Inḥidār Lūjīstī Thunā'ī al-Istijāba li-'Ayyina min al-Maghrib al-'Arabī," *Siyasat Arabiyya*, no. 26 (September 2020), p. 82.

41 For instance, in brief, we give the example of Morocco, where this merging between traditional, conservative kingly rule on one hand, and modern, democratic institutions on the other, appears via §41–42 of the 2011 constitution presently in force. See: Kingdom of Morocco, Ministry of Justice, *Dustūr al-Mamlaka al-Maghribiyya li-sanat 2011* (Rabat: 2011), accessed on 4/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3tkAPeM>

need to implement radical reform within the system of governance and hold highly transparent democratic elections.<sup>(42)</sup>

No matter how much the constituent states of the third group have grown together in terms of inclination toward religious regimes and Islamic Shari'a, the people of these states have a different vision of the nature of these regimes. On one hand, Saudi (and, to a lesser extent, Qatari) citizens believe that Islamic Shari'a and religion are strongly linked to autocratic management of politics for the reasons mentioned above in relation to Saudi Arabia. On the other, citizens of states such as Jordan and Mauritania believe that religious regimes can coexist with party competition to some extent. This does not pose a great problem as far as countries like Jordan and Mauritania are concerned in and of itself given the convergence of the dominant political culture in society, which does not diverge from political orientations. In Jordan, for instance, the upper limit of protests at times of unrest is not to exceed demands for "political and economic reform".<sup>(43)</sup>

- The issue of homogeneity brings up a discussion within Arab societies, whence we may respond to the third question as to the components, or elements, through which one may understand the similarities and differences between groups. Based on the results of the analysis, we may conclude that the impact factor for the first principal component (i.e., religious versus non-religious regimes) was greater than that of the second principal component (i.e., competition versus autocracy)— that is also demonstrated through Figure 2, since the distribution of states seems clearer on the horizontal plane expressing the first principal component. That may largely be explained by the fact that the bulk of states are inclined toward the competition-based regime, so

the variable does not play a great role in creating disparity between societies. As a result, the vast majority of Arab citizens articulate their desire for competition-based, somewhat non-autocratic regimes. Yet at the same time, there is a very significant proportion that continues to cling to the factor of religion and its interference with state affairs. Some Arab societies demand democracy, yet simultaneously demand the exclusion of religious parties or call for military regimes. This would indicate, in the perceptions of many citizens, disagreements and contradictions in the understanding of democratic authority and how suitable it may be as a political regime.

Finally, it remains to indicate that the questions directed toward the AOI samples avoided focusing on the term "secular regime". This is perhaps still understandable given the negative connotation of the word among the Arab public and even in some aspects of contemporary Arab thought. It is in this context that Mohammed Abed al-Jabri (1935–2010) was known, having become famous as a secular intellectual as well as his avowed refusal of the term "secularism" in which he was persistent throughout his intellectual life, proposing "democracy and rationality" in its stead.<sup>(44)</sup> He holds that the notion of secularism is neither sufficient nor effective in the land of Islam, while emphasizing that the secular regime is compatible with Arab-Islamic culture because the latter has never seen the phenomenon of the church as an institutional clergy. For the Islamist trend, refusal prevails; for instance, we find that Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi turns secularism into an enemy of religion in many of his books without going into its details. Thus, his objection is one of principle because it threatens Islam, as he believes, as a religion and a way of life collectively and individually.<sup>(45)</sup> This makes the discussion of this concept onerous and

42 " *Tuṭālīb bil-Taghyīr al-Jadhīrī... Tajdud Masīrāt al-Hīrāk al-Jazā'irī wa-l-Rāṣ Tibbūn Ghayr Munza'ij minhā*, *Aljazeera Net*, 5/3/2019, accessed on 4/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3jOb7Mt>

43 Mahmood Sharan, " *Hīrak al-Urdun... Limādḥā Yataghayyar Saqf al-Shi'ārāt wa-l-Maṭālib?* " *Aljazeera Net*, 9/12/2019, accessed on 4/1/2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3tjRuzj>

44 Mohammed Abed al-Jabri & Hassan Hanafi, *Hīwār al-Mashriq wa-l-Maghrib: Naḥw I'ādat al-Fikr al-Qawmī al-'Arabī* (Beirut: Arab Institute for Research & Publishing, 1990), pp. 39-44; Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, *Wijhat Naẓar: Naḥw I'ādat Binā' Qadāyā al-Fikr al-'Arabī al-Mu'āṣir* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1992), pp. 102-105. See also, in greater detail: Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, *al-Dīn wa-l-Dawla wa-Taṭbīq al-Sharī'a* (Beirut: Centre for Arab Unity Studies, 1996), pp. 108-114.

45 See: Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *al-Islām wa-l-'Ilmāniyya Wajhān li-Wajh* (Cairo: Wahba Bookstore, 1997), pp. 42-44; Yusuf al-Qaradawi, *al-Taṭarruf al-'Ilmānī fī Muwājahat al-Islām* (Cairo: Dar El-Shorouk, 2001), pp. 13-15.

undesirable and causes the acceptance of secularism-related concepts such as democracy, freedom, and

human rights in some countries to falter, as the 2019-2020 AOI confirms.

## Conclusion

This study has sought to determine which political regimes that Arab societies consider suitable. It has demonstrated that the vast majority prefer the democratic option and call upon political forces across the spectrum to adopt a competition-based political regime by means of the ballot box. This has proven to be the general orientation of the majority. In return, the AOI data has given us another orientation among citizens who do not see a solution in democracy. This tendency includes several undemocratic options, divided between the exclusion of non-religious parties, an invitation to adopt a system that implements Islamic Shari'a, and preference for the military regime.

These have been the major orientations that were initially elucidated. The Index's charts have shown the ascendance of some states by great margins in respondents' choice of a given orientation (such as Algeria, Egypt, and Kuwait in relation to the democratic tendency, or Saudi Arabia in relation to the regime of applying Shari'a). These choices have coalesced within their proponents based on the social and political conditions in countries of the Arab region. If the product of the analysis on this initial level has highlighted that democracy is the aim of the Arab public, this would not explain to us the choices

upon which some Arab countries which are growing geographically and culturally closer together have disagreed. Therefore, there was the need for a second level of analysis, made possible by the adopted methodology, principal component analysis, which has assisted us in formulating groups of states that are closely related in terms of political perceptions on favourable or unfavourable regimes. Groups with an inclination toward regimes made up of various components have taken shape. One may thus consider them to be styles of political manifestation.

Ultimately, the study has helped us to understand the degree of compatibility between groups. These choices have been clarified especially following the events of the Arab Spring that represented milestones in the Arab region's history. These events empowered the Arab public to articulate their political views concerning the system of governance of which they approve. Simultaneously, the study has underscored the significance of understanding preferences within a space in which states are distributed, according to elaborate components where several factors (e.g., religious, non-religious, military, competition-based, etc.) overlap: these signify a divergence in the democratic setting of Arab societies and how citizens perceive it.

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