

Arab Public Opinion and Government Performance in Providing Basic Services⁽¹⁾

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Abstract: This paper presents public opinion trends in the Arab region towards government performance in providing basic services, through the 2019/2020 Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies' Arab Opinion Index. It reviews Arab public opinion trends towards government performance in public policy and the provision of basic services, drawing comparisons with previous Arab Opinion Index data. Furthermore, it highlights the relationship between satisfaction with government performance and trust in the government, and the position of public services within the priorities of Arab citizens. Finally, the paper briefly concludes some insights on how Arab public opinion trends on how public health services and confidence in government affected the behaviour of citizens during the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Arab Public Opinion Arab Opinion Index Government Performance Basic Services
 Government Health Services Trust in Government Covid-19 Pandemic

Introduction

Public policies, including those related to the provision of public services of a quality acceptable to citizens, are a major part of the state's responsibilities.⁽³⁾ Thus, measuring the extent of citizens' satisfaction with those services helps gauge general satisfaction with government performance. As satisfaction decreases, the more likely the political system will be subjected to pressure that may ultimately affect its stability.⁽⁴⁾ In addition, low quality of services will inevitably affect the productivity of individual contribution to economic production and the employment sector,

especially with regard to education, health and infrastructure services.

Arab countries differ in several respects, most notably in terms of development and the nature of the economy, and also in Gross National Product (GNP).⁽⁵⁾ This leads to a difference at two basic levels: government performance in public services, and spending on this sector. This leads to a difference in Arab public opinion, which reflects citizens' satisfaction with the performance of their governments. Given the urgent necessity of evaluating

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² The Public Opinion Polling Unit at ACRPS conducts the Arab Opinion Index annual survey in order to gauge Arab public opinion around a number of political, cultural, and social topics.

³ David Easton, *The Political System: An Inquiry into the State of Political Science* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953); David Easton, *A Framework for Political Analysis* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965); David Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life* (New York: Wiley, 1965).

⁴ The systems approach to the analysis of political systems stresses that the justification for the existence of any political system is its ability to transform the inputs coming from its environment, which are often shaped by demands, into outputs represented in public policies, decisions and laws related to the distribution of values and the achievement of community goals. For more on a systems approach to analyzing political systems, see the work of David Easton (1917-2014) in: *Ibid.*

⁵ Gross National Product (GNP) is an estimate of the total value of all the final products and services turned out in a given period by the means of production owned by a country's residents.

government performance in the field of public policies in general, and public services in particular, the Arab Opinion Index (AOI) included a set of questions that measure Arab respondents' evaluation of their governments' performance regarding public policies and basic services in the 2019 / 2020 survey. These questions spanned 10 areas: water supply; universal electricity connection; sanitation services; improving the standard of public schools; improving government health services; improving the quality of roads; improving public transportation; equitable distribution of services across different regions; finding solutions to unemployment; and improving the standard of living of the poor. Respondents were asked to rate government performance in each of the areas through four options: very good, good, poor, and very poor.

This paper considers trends in Arab public opinion regarding public policies and basic services, including government health services. It is divided into six parts. First, it evaluates government performance in the field of public services the 2019 / 2020 survey. Second, it compares these evaluations to previous surveys. Third, it conducts a cross-country analysis of the relevant data. Fourth, it examines the relationship between the satisfaction with government performance and trust in government. Fifth, it assesses the status of public services in the priorities of Arab citizens. Sixth, it monitors a set of indications for Arab public opinion trends regarding government health services and confidence in governments to manage the behaviour of citizens during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Evaluations of Government Performance in Public Service Provision in the 2019 / 2020 Survey

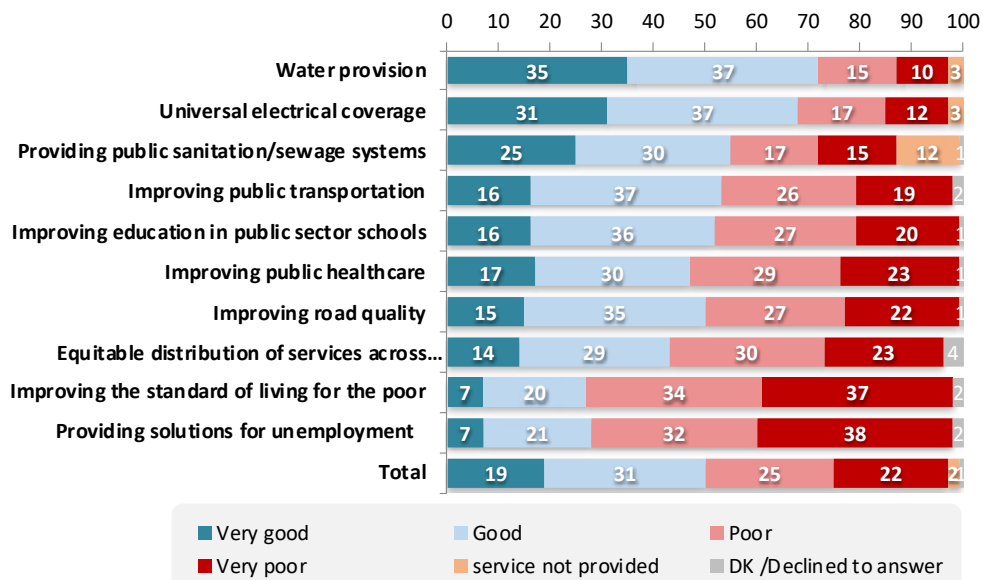
Views of government performance in the area of public policy and basic services were analysed by calculating the overall evaluation score for all areas. The results indicated a division in Arab public opinion over the evaluation of these policies and services in general in the countries in which the survey was conducted; 50 percent of respondents reported that the government's performance in providing these services was positive (very good, or good), while 47 percent of them rated the performance of governments in these areas as negative (poor, or very poor).

At an individual level, the results show four main groups of these services according to respondent feedback (see Figure 1). In the first group, the most positively evaluated of the services and policies is water provision; 72 percent of the feedback was positive. This was followed by electricity coverage in all regions, with a positive evaluation rate of 68 percent. The second group includes public school education and infrastructure such as roads, sanitation services, and public transportation, which encountered divided public opinion, with positive

evaluation ranging between 52 percent and 55 percent (50 percent for road improvement, 55 percent for sanitation services improvement, and 53 percent for public transportation improvement).

The third group includes improving government health services and the equitable distribution of services across governorates/regions. Less than half of the respondents reported positive feedback on government performance in these areas (47 percent for improving government health services, and 43 percent for the equitable distribution of services). Rather, the majority of respondents provided negative feedback of government performance in these services (poor or very poor). The fourth group, receiving the lowest rating among respondents, includes providing job opportunities and improving the standard of living for the poor; One third of the respondents evaluated it positively, in contrast to the two thirds who evaluated it negatively (70 percent with regard to providing job opportunities and finding solutions to unemployment, and 71 percent with regard to improving the standard of living of the poor).

Figure 1
Evaluations of Government Performance in Public Service Provision



Source: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, *Arab Opinion Index 2019/2020*, Public Opinion Polling Unit.

Comparing Evaluations of Government Performance in Public Services Provision over Time (2012/2013-2019/2020)

A comparison of respondent evaluations of public policies and basic services in the 2019 / 2020 survey with their evaluations in the 2017/2018, 2016, 2015, 2014, and 2012 / 2013 surveys, reveals increased positive feedback for government services in general, especially with regard to infrastructure such as universal electricity coverage and water provision, sanitation services and road improvement (see Table 1). For example, the percentage of respondents who evaluated the government's provision of universal electricity coverage positively increased from 48 percent in the 2012 / 2013 survey to 68 percent in the 2019 / 2020 survey. Furthermore, positive feedback of water provision increased from 57 percent in 2012 / 2013 survey to 72 percent in 2019 / 2020 survey.

Cross Country Comparison of Evaluations of Government Performance in Public Services Provision

Responses varied across the countries in which the survey was conducted. The combined ratings of governments' performance in the ten areas surveyed turned out to be divided almost equally between positive (50%) and negative (47%). The results demonstrated an almost unanimous positive (good or very good) response from Qatar's respondents at 97 percent, followed by Saudi Arabia at 92 percent, then Kuwait with 77 percent. A smaller majority reported a positive evaluation of government services in Egypt (58 %) and Jordan (55 %).

In contrast, the survey recorded a majority negative (poor or very poor) feedback of public services, most notably, in Lebanon with 81 percent, followed by Iraq with 78 percent, and Tunisia with 66 percent. It should be noted that although basic government services in Mauritania received an evaluation that was 39 percent positive and 50 percent negative, some 10 percent of respondents reported the complete absence of these services. This discrepancy is clearly explained by the individual nature

Table 1
Evaluations of Government Performance in Public Services Provision Compared over Time

	Very good / Good						Poor / Very poor						service not provided			DK /Declined to answer					
	2019/ 2020	2017/ 2018	2016	2015	2014	2012/ 2013	2019/ 2020	2017/ 2018	2016	2015	2014	2012/ 2013	2019/ 2020	2017/ 2018	2016	2019/ 2020	2017/ 2018	2016	2015	2014	2012/ 2013
Universal electrical coverage	68	65	56	53	50	48	29	31	38	45	48	49	3	3	4	--	--	1	2	2	3
Water Provision	72	67	59	61	61	57	25	30	37	38	38	42	3	3	3	--	--	1	--	1	1
Improving education in public sector schools	52	50	55	50	47	50	47	49	44	48	52	48	--	--	--	1	1	1	2	2	2
Providing public sanitation/sewage systems	55	49	46	48	47	45	32	39	41	50	51	53	12	11	11	1	1	1	1	2	2
Improving public healthcare	47	44	53	56	53	49	52	55	46	43	46	50	--	--	--	1	1	1	1	1	1
Improving road quality	50	50	51	52	47	44	49	49	48	47	51	54	--	--	--	1	1	1	1	2	2
Ensuring fairness in the provision of services across all districts in your country	43	38	40	38	35	33	53	57	57	59	61	61	--	--	--	4	5	3	3	4	5
Improving the standard of living for the poor	27	28	31	32	27	28	71	71	68	67	72	70	--	--	--	2	1	1	1	1	2
Providing solutions for unemployment	28	25	30	30	26	26	70	73	69	69	72	71	--	--	--	2	2	1	1	2	2
Improving public transportation	53	--	--	--	--	--	45	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	--	2	--	--	--	--	--
Total	50	46	47	47	44	42	47	50	50	52	54	55	2	2	2	1	2	1	1	2	3

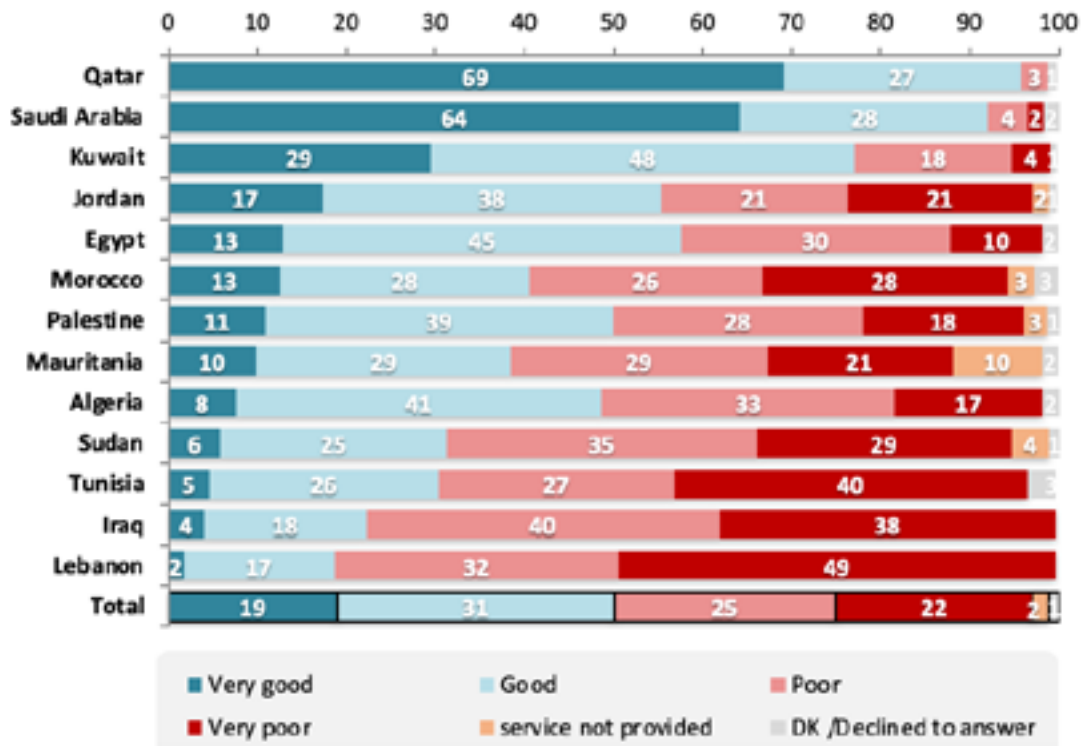
Source: Ibid.

of each Arab economy, reflected in government budget allocation to the public services sector; Respondents from the Arab Gulf countries (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait) are most satisfied with the performance of their governments, while countries facing economic and financial challenges (Lebanon, Iraq, and Mauritania) are most discontented (Figure 2).

The Relationship between Satisfaction with Government Performance and Trust in Government

The evaluation of government performance in specific areas, whether in terms of foreign policy, economic policy, or basic service provision, has been, to some extent, consistent with the level of trust in

Figure 2
Cross Country Comparison of Evaluations of Government Performance in Public Services Provision



Source: Ibid.

each country's government. As indicated by public opinion trends in each of the countries surveyed, confidence in the government increases in conjunction with satisfaction in government performance on other issues, while trust in government decreases in conjunction with dissatisfaction in government performance on other issues (see Table 2).

Arab Priorities: Public Services Are a Need, Not a Luxury

To deepen the understanding of public opinion in the Arab region regarding the general conditions in their societies, the Arab Opinion Index provides for an open-ended question regarding the most important problem facing their countries, in a way that highlights citizens' priorities and expresses their detailed assessment of the challenges facing their countries. Only 3 percent of respondents said that they didn't know or declined to give an answer on the most important problem facing their countries; 97 percent of respondents did give an opinion. A

high percentage shows that the citizens of the Arab region have knowledge and an opinion regarding the conditions, problems, and challenges in their countries.

The results show that poor economic conditions are a main priority for citizens of Arab states. Some 20 percent of respondents answered with this problem, followed by unemployment (17 percent), and then high cost of living and prices (14 percent). In the same context, 8 percent said that financial and administrative corruption is the main problem, and nearly 7 percent of respondents focused on poverty and a low standard of living as the most important problems in the region. This was followed by a focus on weak public services (6 percent), social problems (4 percent), then political instability (3 percent). The lack of security and safety including the threat of terrorism and governance and public policy were cited as the biggest problems by 2 percent. Other respondents cited the main problem as the Israeli occupation (2%), immigrants/refugees (2%), and

Table 2
Intersection of Trust in the Government and Assessment of Government Performance on Other Issues

Public Opinion on Foreign Policy To what extent do the policies of the government of your country reflect the views of the citizenry within the Foreign policy?	To what extent do you trust the government?			
	I trust to a great extent	I trust to some extent	I do not trust to some extent	I do not trust at all
Reflects citizens' views to a great extent / Reflects citizens' views to some extent	89	75	43	28
Does not reflect citizens' views, to some extent / Does not reflect citizens' views at all	11	25	57	72
Total	100	100	100	100
Respondent attitudes regarding the economy To what extent do the policies of the government of your country reflect the views of the citizenry within domestic economic policy?	To what extent do you trust the government?			
	I trust to a great extent	I trust to some extent	I do not trust to some extent	I do not trust at all
Reflects citizens' views to a great extent / Reflects citizens' views to some extent	87	72	45	21
Does not reflect citizens' views, to some extent / Does not reflect citizens' views at all	13	28	55	79
Total	100	100	100	100
Respondent Evaluations of basic services provided by the government	To what extent do you trust the government?			
	I trust to a great extent	I trust to some extent	I do not trust to some extent	I do not trust at all
Very good / Good	82	72	47	26
Poor / Very poor	18	28	53	74
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: Ibid

regional/sectarian/ethnic/tribal divisions (1%). Accordingly, the priorities of citizens in the Arab region can be presented under three main themes:

- Economic priorities: About 57 percent of the respondents mentioned problems such as

unemployment, high prices, poor economic conditions and poverty.

- Security priorities and instability: A total of 10 percent of respondents cited problems such as the lack of security and safety, the danger of terrorism, regional and ethnic division, political instability,

and the dangers of external interference and the Israeli occupation.

- Priorities related to the performance and policies of governments: 16% of respondents mentioned problems such as weak public services, financial and administrative corruption, governance and its policies and democratic transition, which fall within the framework of public policies and institutions in Arab countries.

In other words, about 57 percent of Arab citizens believe that problems of an economic nature, which more directly affect their lives, are their main priority for the government; relegating the improvement of public services to second place. This is another indication that their assessment of government performance as a whole is very negative, revealing low levels of trust in governments. Citizens who do not trust their government's ability to provide the basic necessities of life, such as jobs and to provide access to basic goods and services, cannot trust them to provide luxuries.

- **Arab Public Opinion on Government Health Services and the Covid-19 Pandemic**

The results above, especially those related to government health services, are indicative of many Arabs' experience of the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to the rapid collapse in health systems across most countries in the Arab region, exacerbated by the various waves and mutations of the virus, these results help explain Arab citizens' reluctance to take measures

to check the pandemic, which in most cases required the use of hard force. Mutual trust between citizen and government, by definition, implies "Confidence that one will find what is desired from another, rather than what is feared", just as it expresses "A psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another".⁽⁶⁾ This psychological factor is very important in understanding how conspiracy theories have spread in the Arab region, not only about the origin of Covid-19, but also the suspicion that Arab governments are exploiting the pandemic to suppress citizens, restrict their freedom of movement, and even prevent them from practising their religious rites.

A significant number of those infected with Covid-19 did not have enough confidence in government health centres to seek treatment, even when they became critically ill; Either because they did not believe that the infection required medical intervention, or because they feared that their health would deteriorate once they were admitted to public hospitals. Moreover, government-led national campaigns to speed up the vaccination process met with stiff resistance from a significant segment of the population who fell victim to the anti-vaccine rhetoric that spread on social media like wildfire. All of these trends can be explained using the AOI data reviewed above, specifically that related to government health services and levels of trust in government.

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⁶ *Trust and Public Policy: How Better Governance Can Help Rebuild Public Trust* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2017), p. 17.