

Research for Self-Knowledge and a Bridge to Other World Regions

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A number of cross-national and collaborative research initiatives in the Arab world and elsewhere are undertaking to assess citizen attitudes about public affairs, governance and social policy. These projects, including the Global Barometer and the World Values Survey, are concerned not only with what ordinary men and women think about important issues, they also seek to identify the factors that shape attitudes and values and that help to explain why different people have different views and perceptions.

This work is significant for scholarly purposes but that is not its only important objective. Responding to concerns about development and reform, addressed in the UNDP's Arab Human Development Report series, as well as elsewhere, these studies show clearly what people think about the issues of the day. Studies of public opinion thus help to dispel myths and stereotypes. Equally important, they make it harder for officials and activists, both in foreign countries and at home, to make misleading claims and pronouncements about what people in the Arab world believe and about what they want.

One of the most important and promising of these cross-national research initiatives is the Global Barometer. There are locally run Barometers in East Asia, Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. There is also an Arab Barometer, and all of these projects strike a balance between cooperation with one another and an emphasis on the concerns of their particular world regions. Designed and carried out by scholars and researchers in five Arab countries, working in cooperation with two American scholars, Amaney Jamal of Princeton University and Mark Tessler of the University of Michigan, Arab Barometer surveys were conducted in 2006 in Morocco, Algeria, Palestine, Jordan and Kuwait.

All of the surveys involved face-face interviews with a representative national sample of men and women over the age of 18. In Kuwait, the country with the smallest population, 750 individuals were interviewed. The samples ranged from 1143 to 1300 in the other countries.

Among other things, the surveys found that there is broad support for political reform and democracy, with an emphasis on making leaders and governments accountable to the people they serve. Though many respondents acknowledged that democracy is not without problems, most agreed that whatever its limits, democracy is still the best political system. This view was expressed by 92 percent in Morocco, by 83 percent in Algeria, by 83 percent in Palestine, by 86 percent in Jordan and by 88 percent in Kuwait.

Many other questions explored people's understanding of democracy, confirming that the concept was meaningful to respondents but also revealing some of the different values and processes that people associate with democratic governance.

One important issue on which there is as much disagreement as agreement concerns the role of religion in political and public affairs. A number of questions explored this topic, one of which asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed that religious practice is a private matter and should be separated from socio-political life. Agreement with this statement was expressed by 51 percent in Morocco, by 36 percent in Algeria, by 48 percent in Palestine, by 58 percent in Jordan and by 54 percent in Kuwait.

Among the many other questions asked in the Arab Barometer were inquiries pertaining to the roles and status of women. On some dimensions, there was substantial support for the equality of men and women. For example, agreement that a university education is just as important for a girl as it is for a boy ranged from a high of 84 percent in Kuwait to a low of 64 percent in Jordan.

On other issues, however, there was less support for gender equality and less agreement both within and across countries. Asked whether a woman can be president or prime minister of a Muslim country, agreement was expressed by only 41 percent in Algeria and only 49 percent in Kuwait. Agreement was expressed by 57, 64 and 68 percent in Palestine, Jordan and Morocco, respectively.

As stated, this project is important not only because of the light it sheds on Arab public opinion but also because it has been carried out in cooperation with Barometer initiatives in other world regions. The East Asia Barometer, with headquarters in Taiwan, works with teams in eleven countries. The Latin American Barometer, with headquarters in Chile, works in eighteen countries. The Sub-Saharan Africa Barometer, with headquarters in South Africa and Ghana, as well as the U.S., has done surveys in sixteen countries.

The Arab Barometer is the newest and smallest of the regional Barometers but it has made a strong excellent start and is hoping to be able to expand in the future.

In working together, all of the Barometers chose questions from a common interview schedule, thus enabling comparisons to be made not only within but also across work regions. Approximately half of the items on the Arab Barometer survey instrument were taken from the common survey instrument. At the same time, issues and priorities are not all the same in different regions, and each Barometer also asked many region-specific questions in its surveys.

But while there is a specific as well as a general dimension to the Arab Barometer, collaboration with the other regional Barometers is an important bridge to international research. It assures that information and insight about the Arab experience will be included in, and will contribute to, scholarly and policy-relevant research inquiry throughout the world. This, in turn, enhances understanding and increases the ability to learn which insights are unique to particular countries or regions and which are part of the universal human condition in the twenty-first century.