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# Ten Years After the “Arab Spring” – What Does the Region Think Today?

A Survey of Public Opinion in the Middle East and North Africa

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Ten years after the start of the uprisings that swept through the Arab world, the region's socio-economic disparities remain a key challenge. Trust in political parties and parliaments is low, but civil society organisations are highly respected. A proper civil society of engaged citizens seems to be emerging in many countries. While traditional external actors, such as the US and France, are losing influence in the region, China, Turkey, and Russia are assuming a more important role. Meanwhile, Germany enjoys high standing in the region.

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Bread, dignity, and freedom – ten years ago, these were the core demands of the mainly young protesters who took to the streets all over the Arab world. The self-immolation of vegetable vendor Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010 in the small Tunisian town of Sidi Bouzid was the spark that turned the simmering dissatisfaction with social conditions into violent protests. Bouazizi, then 27, had complained of harassment by local authorities who confiscated his vegetable stand and refused to give him a permit. The constant injustice and mistreatment that he experienced at the hands of the police led him to commit his final, desperate act of self-immolation. This act has now come to symbolise the start of the “Arab Spring”, and represents the social inequality, rampant corruption, and sense of helplessness in the face of arbitrary state power.

The outrage unleashed by this act triggered a nationwide wave of protests against the autocratic regime of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, who had been in power since 1987. As the mass protests intensified, Ben Ali fled Tunisia for Saudi Arabia on 14 January 2011. The swift overthrow of the kleptocratic regime in Tunisia galvanised disaffected people in Egypt, Libya, Syria, and other countries in the Arab world to protest against their own governments. Largely coordinated through social media, these protest movements took the region's rulers by surprise, and revealed the dire need for reform and change after decades of mismanagement and repression.

While the ruling powers were overturned in Tunisia (January 2011) and Egypt (February 2011), Syria and Libya sank into civil wars due to their rulers' repressive use of force and the deployment of the military. However, despite a series of reforms following the 2011 uprisings, discontent in the region persisted and the merely cosmetic promises of reform failed to assuage calls for fundamental structural change. In 2019, a second wave of protests swept across the region, including the *Hirak* movement in Algeria<sup>1</sup> and protests in Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan. In the latter, they led to the ousting of dictator Omar al-Bashir, who had been in power since 1993.

The region was already struggling with weak economic growth, but this has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is estimated that the regional economy has contracted by 5.2 per cent.<sup>2</sup> Nearly a third of the region's youth are unemployed and, particularly in Tunisia and Jordan, these rates have remained consistently high for the last decade. The Middle East and North Africa region has one of the highest youth unemployment rates in the world.<sup>3</sup> The region faces many common challenges, but the different systems of government and disparate social realities of each country should always be taken into account.

In the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic, and to mark the tenth anniversary of the start of the uprisings across the Arab world, the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's Regional Programme for

Political Dialogue in the Southern Mediterranean (KAS PolDiMed) conducted a representative survey in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Jordan, and Lebanon. A total of 10,841 people were interviewed by telephone between October and December 2020.<sup>4</sup> The main results of the survey are presented below.

### **The Majority are Optimistic About their Economic Future**

Economic conditions were and remain a key challenge in the region, and this is one of the reasons for the protests that have occurred since 2011. Whereas ten years ago, one third of the citizens surveyed in the region said their personal economic situation was good or very good,<sup>5</sup> this perception has actually deteriorated since then. Today, 39 per cent of people in Morocco and 26 per cent in Algeria and Libya rate their economic situation as good or very good. The lowest figures are seen in Tunisia (three per cent) and Lebanon (one per cent). In Tunisia, the figure has fallen by a quarter compared to 2011.<sup>6</sup> This points to a sense of disillusionment because the revolution failed to bring the hoped-for prosperity and job opportunities. The region seems, thus, to have experienced a lost decade in terms of economic growth. This has been exacerbated by a failure to diversify the economy, or to undertake far-reaching labour market reforms.<sup>7</sup>

Lebanon finds itself beset by multiple crises, including ongoing financial and economic challenges. High (youth) unemployment, currency collapse, hyperinflation, and rampant corruption among the political elite are creating a growing sense of resignation among the Lebanese people, and this is also reflected in the country's gloomy economic forecasts. The deepening financial crisis since 2019 has led to renewed protests with calls for a fundamental restructuring of the state, and the end of the sectarian political system. In the eyes of many Lebanese, this system has fostered systematic clientelism and corruption since the civil war ended in 1990. The devastating explosion at the port of Beirut in the summer of 2020 also consolidated the image of a self-serving, unscrupulous elite that has lost all

sense of the common good and of overall social development.

According to some sources, half of the Lebanese population now lives below the poverty line.<sup>8</sup> The respondents in Lebanon are correspondingly pessimistic about their personal economic future. Only 14 per cent are hopeful about the years to come. And it is depressing to note that the younger generation is even less optimistic about the future than the over-30s.<sup>9</sup> This is also reflected in the strong desire of young Lebanese to leave their country. 53 per cent of Lebanese people under 30 say they have considered emigrating in the past twelve months.<sup>10</sup>

**In most countries in the region the respondents are generally optimistic about their economic future, despite the global pandemic.**

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However, with the exception of Lebanon, respondents in the region are generally optimistic about their personal economic future, despite the global pandemic. In Jordan, Morocco, and Libya, more than 60 per cent of respondents believe the country's economic fortunes will improve. In Algeria, the figure of 59 per cent is significantly higher than in Tunisia, at just 47 per cent.<sup>11</sup> In Jordan, job creation in particular is perceived as a major challenge – 30 per cent of respondents say this should be made a government priority.

Morocco's economic policy has been strongly oriented towards Sub-Saharan Africa for many years, and it has opened up new markets, particularly in francophone West Africa. Tunisia is also keen to strengthen its South-South cooperation, while at the same time seeking to boost its faltering economy by reviving its economic relations with Libya. Given the difficult economic situation of the countries surveyed in the region, the respondents' generally optimistic view of







A symbol: The circumstances that led to the explosion at the port of Beirut in August 2020 consolidated the image of an unscrupulous elite that has lost all sense of the common good and of overall social development in the eyes of many Lebanese. Source: © Mohamed Azakir, Reuters.

their economic future may come as a surprise. One of the reasons for this is their strong belief (also with religious connotations) in a better tomorrow. A glance at the 2019 Global Competitiveness Index also reveals that the competitiveness of Arab countries is higher than that

of other developing regions and only surpassed by two regions: Europe/North America and East Asia/Pacific.<sup>12</sup> The potential of the region is obvious: the countries of North Africa and the Levant have an excellent geostrategic location, and benefit from export agreements with

EU countries. They also have a young, fairly well-educated population that is prepared to be mobile and keen to improve their lives.<sup>13</sup> China has recognised this potential and is taking a growing interest in the region.

### **Democratic Institutions are Faltering**

Right from the start, the Arab protest movements were not only calling for economic reform, but above all for an overhaul of the political system. Demands have included greater accountability of those in power, more transparency, and social justice. Decades of authoritarian rule have led the region to consistently be classified as undemocratic in the Freedom House rankings.<sup>14</sup> Since 2015, Tunisia is the only country to be deemed completely free.<sup>15</sup> However, minority rights are also a controversial issue in Tunisia. The rather hesitant and superficial desire for reform across much of the region after 2011 eventually led to more protest movements, culminating in the overthrow of the governments of Algeria and Sudan in 2019. Renewed protests have also led to the promise of more reforms in Lebanon, Morocco, and Jordan.

### **Trust in parliaments and political parties is low across the whole region.**

However, the changes of leadership did not always bring the hoped-for transformation. In Algeria, the prolonged protests of 2019 may have led to the resignation of the country's long-time president, 82-year-old Abdelaziz Bouteflika, but the election of his 74-year-old successor, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, hardly signalled the advent of a generational change at the head of the country. Algeria's fortunes are still directed by "the deep state" – a complex network of elite politicians dating back to the time of the independence movement. However, Algeria's predominantly young population is no longer prepared to accept this situation; they are calling for radical change and for a renewal of the political class. To

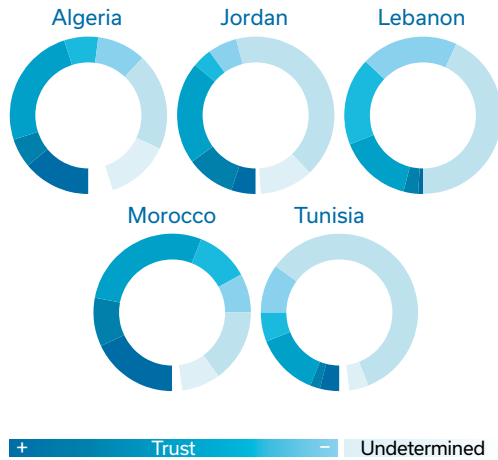
appease popular discontent, it was announced in March that the Parliament would be dissolved, and that early parliamentary elections would be held in June 2021.

One of the key findings of the PolDiMed regional survey is that trust in parliaments and political parties is low across the whole region. A worrying trend is that fewer and fewer citizens have confidence in their governments' performance. Between 2013 and 2018, this confidence fell by more than 20 percentage points.<sup>16</sup> This trend indicates that many citizens believe their initial hopes of better governance and more transparency have not been fulfilled.

Trust in parliaments and political parties is low in all the countries surveyed. Since the majority of political parties in these countries are dominated by personalities rather than policies, and have a strong focus on their leaders, their reputation is directly tied to the personal integrity of their protagonists. Corruption scandals and the pursuit of personal career ambitions over the common good do lasting damage to parties and their role in a parliamentary system. Consequently, trust in parliaments is declining across the region – whether they play an important legislative role, as in Tunisia, or a lesser role, as in Morocco and Jordan.

With the exception of Morocco, where 56 per cent of respondents take a positive view of parliament, less than half of those surveyed overall say they trust their parliaments.<sup>17</sup> It is particularly striking that in Tunisia and Lebanon – the two most democratic countries in the region – only 19 per cent of respondents express confidence in their legislature. In the Kingdom of Jordan, just 37 per cent trust the parliament, and only 23 per cent trust political parties.<sup>18</sup> This figure also suggests that the new parliament, which emerged from the general election on 10 November 2020, has no clear mandate. The fact that 99 of the 130 deputies won a parliamentary seat for the first time suggests that the country is seeking to renew its political class. Only about 20 per cent of the deputies are affiliated with a political party.<sup>19</sup>

**Fig. 1: Trust or Distrust in Parliament**



Source: KAS PolDiMed Survey 2020, n. 4.

In Tunisia, which was portrayed as a model for democracy in the region after 2011, only 18 per cent of respondents have confidence in the work of political parties.<sup>20</sup> Despite the fact that the country's parliament was freely elected, the institution enjoys little confidence among its people. One reason for this could be the perception that it has failed to respond to the economic challenges, combined with relatively weak support for political parties. Observers also argue that the introduction of a parliamentary system in the wake of the 2011 revolution may have been too rapid, and that people were not adequately educated about the importance of civic responsibility and strong parties in such a system.<sup>21</sup>

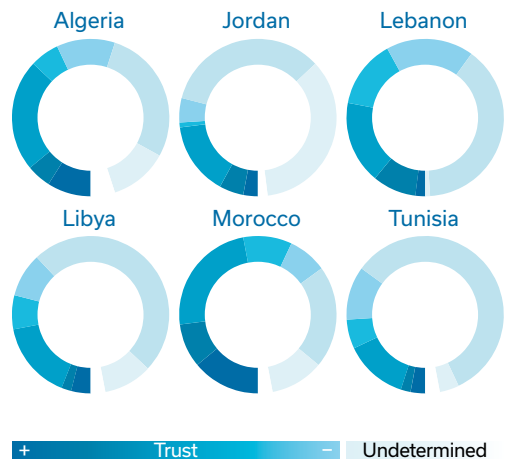
At the time of the revolution, Tunisian citizens had high hopes of a multi-party political system. The result, however, was political stagnation that failed to bring the radical change they sought. Today, the political party system is dominated by the Islamist Ennahda party, which holds a majority in parliament. At the same time, there is no consistent, politically effective opposition. Former law professor Kais Saied, a political outsider, was elected president in October 2019. He is popular with the public but does not have the backing of the country's political class.

He repeatedly comes into conflict with Rached Ghannouchi, the influential parliamentary speaker from the ranks of the Ennahda party.

**In general, throughout the region there is a marked reluctance to join political parties.**

While trust in governments varies across the region, it is evident that governments are more popular when they are perceived as having done a better job in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. Seventy-six per cent of respondents in Morocco, 71 per cent in Jordan and 70 per cent in Algeria say they have full or partial trust in their government.<sup>22</sup> These approval ratings correspond with findings that 61 per cent of respondents in Jordan, 60 per cent in Morocco, and 50 per cent in Algeria say their governments have responded well or very well to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>23</sup> Although, or perhaps because, the two monarchies of Morocco and Jordan, along with Algeria, allow less freedom of expression and press freedom than Tunisia and Lebanon, the governments' crisis management

**Fig. 2: Trust or Distrust in Political Parties**



Source: KAS PolDiMed Survey 2020, n. 4.

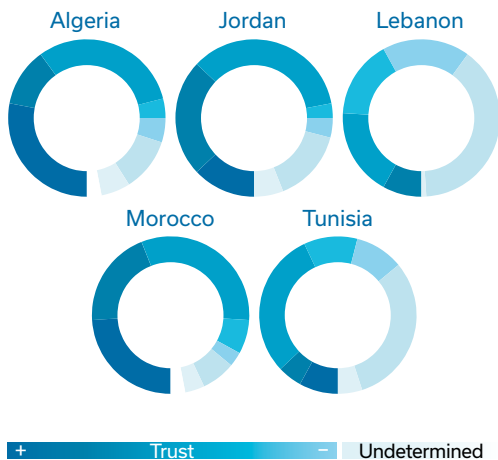
in these last two countries – and hence trust in them – is assessed more negatively. Only 15 per cent of respondents in Tunisia and 18 per cent in Lebanon say their governments have responded well to the health crisis.<sup>24</sup> Accordingly, trust in the government was lowest in Tunisia (42 per cent) and Lebanon (26 per cent).<sup>25</sup> Once again, it is striking that the two countries in the region that are generally described as democratic have the lowest levels of trust in their governments.

In general, throughout the region there is a marked reluctance to join political parties. Only 30 per cent of respondents in Lebanon, 25 per cent in Morocco, and 20 per cent in Libya and Algeria say they could imagine joining a political party. In Tunisia, the proportion is even lower, at just 16 per cent of respondents.<sup>26</sup> This reveals a deep scepticism towards the existing system of political parties across the region, and highlights the need for a fundamental debate on alternative forms of modern party work, and the need for party reforms.

### High Levels of Trust in Civil Society Organisations and Local Government

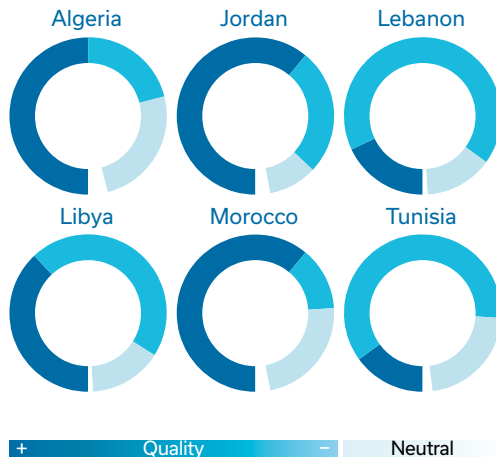
Although trust in political parties and parliaments is weak, the high level of trust in civil society

**Fig. 3: Trust or Distrust in the National Government**



Source: KAS PolDiMed Survey 2020, n. 4.

**Fig. 4: Opinion on the National Government's Crisis Management in the COVID-19 Pandemic**



Source: KAS PolDiMed Survey 2020, n. 4.

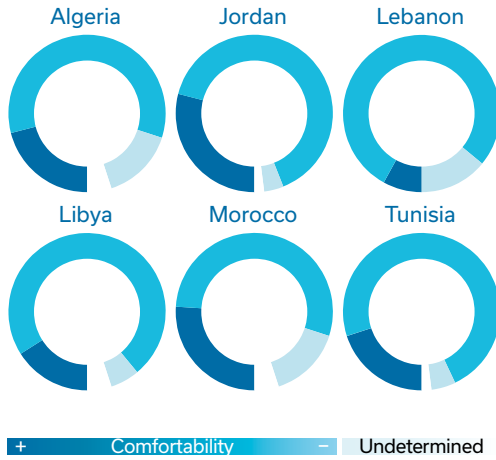
organisations speaks for the emergence of an active civil society. In every country covered by the survey except Lebanon, civil society groups are highly regarded and given positive ratings by more than half of respondents. Their approval rating is highest in Morocco at 76 per cent, while in Lebanon it is lowest at 38 per cent. Sixty-five per cent of respondents in Algeria, 62 per cent in Tunisia and 51 per cent in Jordan say they trust non-governmental organisations, which also include religious communities such as mosques.<sup>27</sup>

The high approval ratings for civil society organisations and non-state actors might reflect, in part, the great scepticism about the performance of political institutions and the underlying distrust of politicians, as described above. This lack of trust in the effectiveness of state institutions could lead to a further erosion of trust in the basic components of democracy, and to a corresponding withdrawal from political participation. The high level of approval for non-state actors is all the more significant, as they could act as key partners for state institutions and help government policies to gain greater acceptance.

The survey results also underline the importance of local authorities in fragmented societies.

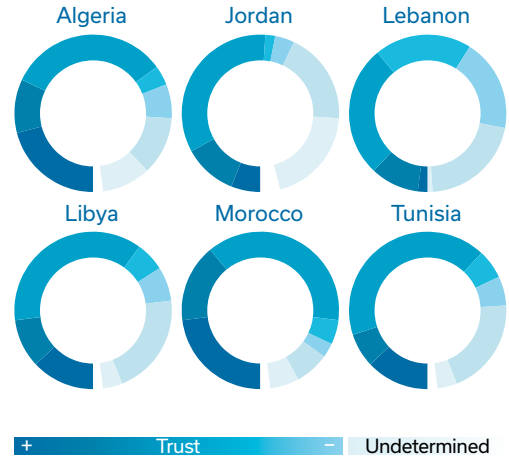


**Fig. 5: Comfortability Regarding Joining a Political Party**



Source: KAS PolDiMed Survey 2020, n.4.

**Fig. 6: Trust or Distrust in Civil Society Organisations**



Source: KAS PolDiMed Survey 2020, n.4.

In Lebanon and Libya, local and municipal authorities enjoy a far higher level of trust than national institutions.<sup>28</sup> Devolving power to local and municipal authorities could yield significant benefits for increasing government legitimacy. For Libya in particular, this could be a way of regaining trust after nearly seven years of dysfunctional government. Libya, which became the scene of a proxy war between foreign powers and has been administered by two parallel governments since 2014, began taking steps to restore national unity in the autumn of 2020. In February 2021, with the help of United Nations mediators, a Government of National Unity was designated to prepare for parliamentary and presidential elections on 24 December 2021, Libyan Independence Day. In this process, tribal representatives and local elected officials can make an important contribution to achieving reconciliation between the conflicting sides, and to restoring the country’s institutional unity.

### A New Imbalance in International Relations

External actors have traditionally had a major influence on developments in the region. In Libya, it is unlikely that the fall of the Gaddafi regime in 2011 would have happened so quickly without the UN-backed, NATO-led intervention

in March 2011. Regional actors have also always had a major influence. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) stepped in early on to support the region’s monarchies and prevent them from being overthrown. They were themselves fearful of being drawn into the maelstrom triggered by the uprisings.

Under President Obama, the US began to shift its focus to the Indo-Pacific region, and has gradually withdrawn from the Arab world – apart from the Gulf states, where it still maintains military bases. Russia, on the other hand, has been stepping up its activities in the region for years – most recently in February 2021, when it conducted a joint military exercise with the Algerian navy in the Mediterranean. In Libya, Russia also emerged as a key player on the side of self-proclaimed field marshal Khalifa Haftar. And, in 2019, alongside Egypt and the UAE, it supported the military ambitions of Libya’s internationally unrecognised eastern government with mercenaries from the Wagner Group. Russia also plays a dubious role in Syria as a supporter of the Assad regime.

Russia’s current activism in the region is nevertheless appreciated by many people in the countries surveyed, possibly also because Russia is





Welcome guest: Turkey's President Erdoğan enjoys great popularity in the region. Source: © Zoubeir Souissi, Reuters.

perceived as a global player that counteracts the US. Algerians have the most favourable view of Russia at 66 per cent, and Jordan the least at just 22 per cent.<sup>29</sup> The US, on the other hand, which has increasingly lost prestige since the invasion of Iraq in 2003, is viewed most favourably in Morocco with 49 per cent, and least favourably in Lebanon with 25 per cent. Among the other countries, only one in three gives the US a positive rating.<sup>30</sup>

Support for China, on the other hand, is growing across the region. Sixty-seven per cent of respondents in Algeria, 61 per cent in Morocco and 59 per cent in Tunisia say they have a favourable view of China.<sup>31</sup> China's Belt and Road Initiative involves all of these countries.

Russia and China have recently scored additional points in the region by distributing COVID-19 vaccines. Morocco began using the Chinese vaccine Sinopharm at the end of January.<sup>32</sup> There are also plans to use Moroccan factories to produce the Chinese vaccine for the African continent. Tunisia and Algeria are using the Russian vaccine Sputnik V. In the medium term, this is also likely to improve the reputation of Russia and China in the region. The EU-supported COVAX initiative to distribute vaccines around the globe only delivered its first vaccines to Tunisia in mid-March 2021.<sup>33</sup> By then, the Russian and Chinese vaccines had already been in use for weeks, which has provided their respective governments with a great deal of media attention and political credit.

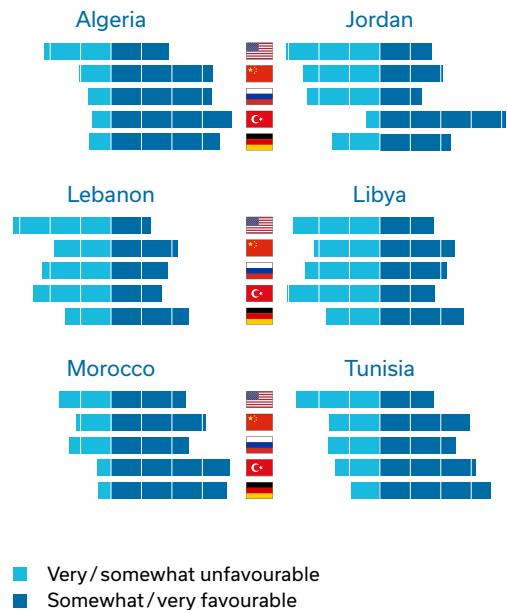
## Germany Enjoys Good Standing in the Region

The two countries that enjoy the highest approval ratings among the countries in the region are Germany and Turkey. The strong focus of Turkish foreign policy on improving relations with Muslim-majority countries in the Arab world since Recep Tayyip Erdoğan took office seems to be paying off. 79 per cent of respondents in Morocco and Algeria, 65 per cent in Jordan and 63 per cent in Tunisia say they have a positive or very positive view of Turkey. This perception is particularly strong among the under-30s. Only Germany is mostly viewed more favourably in the region, with approval ratings of 76 per cent in Morocco, 73 per cent in Tunisia, 71 per cent in Algeria and 55 per cent in Libya.<sup>34</sup> Germany has traditionally enjoyed a good reputation in the region. The country's economic strength and high quality products are admired throughout the region, along with the fact that it welcomed many refugees during the migration crisis of 2015. Germany is also an important partner for development cooperation in the region, quadrupling its annual spending from 750 million euros in 2011 to some 3.4 billion euros in 2019.<sup>35</sup>

### Angela Merkel is by far the most popular European leader in the region.

So while Russia, Turkey, and especially China are increasingly viewed favourably in the region, traditional powers such as the US and France are increasingly coming under pressure. Although Germany is the most well-regarded country in the region, it remains to be seen to what extent this is also linked to the popularity of Chancellor Angela Merkel. She is by far the most popular European leader, though regionally she is surpassed by Turkey's President Erdoğan.<sup>36</sup> Both have displayed strong leadership on issues affecting the region. Merkel was instrumental in welcoming refugees to Germany and the EU

Fig. 7: Favourability towards Various Countries



Source: KAS PoDiMed Survey 2020, n. 4.

in 2015 and 2016, while Erdoğan has championed the Palestinian cause and played identity politics by presenting himself as the defender of Islam in the region. In future, Germany's high approval ratings in the region should continue to be used proactively in the resolute defence of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. This seems particularly important given the equally high approval ratings for authoritarian or illiberal states such as China, Russia, and Turkey.

## Conclusion and Recommendations for Action

Ten years after the uprisings began, the moods and expectations of citizens vary from country to country. People in the kingdoms of Morocco and Jordan seem to be happier with the political and economic situation than those who live in Tunisia and Lebanon, countries with parliamentary systems that are on the road to democracy. Due to the fact that these monarchies exercise a certain degree of repression and restriction

on freedom of expression, it is possible that the recorded answers are not fully identical with the respondents' actual opinions. Criticism of the royal houses rarely goes unpunished. Freedom of opinion and the press are strong in Tunisia and Lebanon, but there is a high level of political frustration. Trust in parliaments and political parties is worryingly low, and in Lebanon trust in civil society organisations is also weak. Although the survey method chosen may have led to a slight distortion of results, the sobering conclusion remains that ten years after the start of the uprisings, high levels of frustration exist about the ineffectiveness of the political class – particularly in Tunisia, the country where it all began. Most countries have failed to implement the desperately needed economic reforms, leading to great scepticism about the performance of political institutions and further distrust of politicians. In some places, this has also led to an increased desire to emigrate.

Creating jobs for young people, diversifying the economy, boosting private sector initiatives, and a consistent approach to tackling corruption and nepotism remain key challenges for the countries of the region. It seems that only sustained improvements in the economy will restore people's trust in their state institutions. To this end, non-state actors could be more closely involved in legislative processes in order to benefit from their high levels of trust. The broad support for China, Russia, and Turkey reveals that authoritarian and illiberal systems are gaining influence in the region. Germany's strong reputation should be used to continue promoting a liberal democratic order and the advantages of parliamentary systems.

*– translated from German –*

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